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ABSTRACT

A synthesis of current research, theory, and professional opinion on how children learn to write, this report begins with a brief introduction followed by a discussion of writing readiness that suggests children's eagerness to learn to write. The third chapter examines children's use of writing to extend the functions of speech, drawing, and play, to participate in adult writing activities such as note writing, and to fulfill school assignments; and the fourth chapter examines how children learn the forms of writing from punctuation and grammar to story structure and conventions for arguing and explaining. The next chapter suggests that children learning to manage the writing process are increasingly able to use writing as a learning process, while the sixth chapter investigates the influence of cultural differences on children's orientation toward language. The seventh chapter states that the teacher's first job is to provide children with intelligently guided writing experiences and the eighth describes two effective student publication projects. The ninth chapter presents a number of ways that parents can help their children become successful writers, the most important being reading aloud to them. The report concludes by urging both educators and researchers to seek out their own justifications for strong writing programs. (MM)

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HOW CHILDREN LEARN TO WRITE

Perspectives on Children's Writing
for Educators and Parents

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Introduction

In the past few years we have seen an enormous increase in the attention given to writing instruction in our schools. Along with new instructional programs and new efforts to evaluate writing skill, there has also been a surge of interest in research on the learning and teaching of written communication.

This new research brings to the educational problem of writing instruction the methods of observation and analysis of several fields, including psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, developmental psychology, anthropology, and rhetoric. Interdisciplinary research on writing is quite new, however, and we will have to wait several years for a substantial and coherent body of scholarly information on which we might base writing instruction.

The timing of shifts of emphasis in education is such, though, that none of us--teachers, administrators, parents--can afford simply to wait. We must try now to understand how children learn to write and how we can most effectively support that learning. And although recent studies cannot give us conclusive information on these matters, they can, taken together, provide valuable perspectives on children's development of writing ability and the roles we can play as teachers. administrators, and parents.

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The discussion that follows represents one person's synthesis of current research, theory, and professional opinion on how children learn to write. It concentrates on elementary school children, and has its origins in an earlier paper entitled "When Children Write: Notes for Parents and Teachers on Children's Written Language Development," which I wrote as part of a project I undertook with teachers, parents, and administrators in Winnetka, Illinois. Marcia Whiteman and her colleagues at the National Institute of Education read that paper and invited me to write a fuller version for NIE.

In the time that I have been working on this project, I have attempted to keep in close touch with research in the field, and have conducted some research myself. I have also worked as a teacher and as an administrator, teaching in and directing the writing program in the College of Arts and Sciences at Northwestern University. In this time, too, I have enjoyed more than my share of opportunities to work with teachers, principals, superintendents, curriculum coordinators, and school board members, helping them to strengthen the writing instruction they offer their students. I have also spoken with groups of parents about how their children learn to write, and have on several occasions tackled the challenging, tricky, and satisfying job of helping my own children with their writing projects. All of these experiences are evident, I think, in what follows. I thank Marcia Whiteman for the invitation to have my say, and the many people, both adults and children, who have taught me what needs to be said.

I have come to see my role in this piece as that of an advocate for one particular right we too often deny our children. I believe that all children deserve a chance to learn to write, so that they might gain the power, both as students and as citizens, that comes with the ability to control and use the medium of written language, and so that they might experience the discoveries and satisfactions that the activity of writing can provide to those who write. I have found that many parents, teachers, school administrators, and researchers share this point of view. I hope this undertaking will support them in their work, and will perhaps increase their number.

The Beginnings of Learning to Write

Many children show the beginnings of their development as writers well before they start to produce their own written compositions. Often the first word a child learns to write is his name, and once he learns it he loves to write it everywhere, autographing his drawings, indicating just who owns which books, and even occasionally leaving his personalized mark on his bedroom wall or the kitchen woodwork.

Young children also sometimes incorporate pretend writing into their play. I know of one preschool child, for example, who enjoys playing the role of restaurant waiter, taking food orders from his parents and older siblings. On some evenings after the family has finished its actual dinner and is sitting around the table, he approaches with pad and pencil in hand, soliciting orders. Although he is not yet able to write, he has an idea of what writing looks like, and he knows at least a few of the functions writing can serve. Prodding his older sister until she concedes and asks for a cheeseburger, he makes an orderly scribble on his pad, then pauses to ask whether she wants a drink as well. Once the meal is brought to the table--short work is made of this part of the game; the child's major interest is in the exchange between waiter and customer, complete with paperwork--the child writes numeral-like figures alongside the scribbles (he has not yet mastered either numbers or letters) and he presents a check to each customer.

Other forms of pretend writing show up in the play of young children, ranging from signs and banners to make-believe letters for out of town relatives. Preschool children whose older siblings enter first grade are not infrequently recruited to play "school," and are given the role of students who are expected to write while the actual first grader assumes the role of the teacher.

Thus many children begin their writing development by incorporating the idea of writing, of making a written notation or record into their play situations, and later extend their pretend writing into forms of actual writing. Some preschoolers become interested in the alphabet and in the spelling of their names, and proceed to "invent" their own writing systems, basing their spellings mainly on the names of the letters in the alphabet. Researchers such as Carol Chomsky, Charles Read, and Glenda Bisse have published studies showing that a number of children do indeed write before they go to school. In their analyses of the linguistic structure of young children's "invented spellings," these studies shed light on the spelling strategies children use in elementary school as well as at home, and remind us that learning to write involves more than being taught.

All the while that young children play with writing and invent their own strategies for spelling actual words, they gather impressions of the nature of written language from what a number of researchers call "early encounters with print." Young children see words in books, magazines, and newspapers, on street signs, billboards, and storefront signs, on soupcans and cereal boxes, and on the television screen. We don't know yet very much about how children make sense of the printed language they encounter; indeed, researchers have only recently begun paying attention to the young child's resources in learning to read and write. A number of research groups now have studies underway, however, and these studies should produce valuable information about the "written language environment" of young children.

As we consider the resources for learning about the nature and uses of writing available to young children, we should note that in addition to varied contact with printed language, children also encounter (and begin to produce themselves) composed, planned, spoken language which, though spoken, shares some properties with written texts. Often children's earliest experience with composed spoken texts is with narratives, stories either read aloud or invented by the storyteller--a parent, usually. Another form of composed speech is that of descriptive text, often evolving from an exchange between parent and child as they look together at a picture book, noting first what the picture shows and then commenting on the object or scene. These two uses of composed language are also characteristic of some children's early school experience. Children in kindergarten and the early grades are often encouraged to "tell what happened," to recount experiences or to tell fantasy stories; and children are also often asked to describe what they have drawn, to provide spoken captions for their pictures.

While recent studies have made increasingly apparent the ample and varied writing that most young children encounter even before they begin school, researchers are also showing us what experienced primary grade teachers have long known--that bringing written language under control is a long and sometimes difficult task for nearly all children. Learning to write doesn't happen overnight; children learn both the uses and the forms of writing gradually, and their early writing shows us evidence of partial learning, or learning-in-progress. To get a fuller sense of some of the early steps children take in learning to write, let us observe three young writers at work, and consider the reactions their writing draws from experienced teachers.

Five year old Dennis has recently received a toy telescope as a gift and he is eager to bring it to school to show his teacher, Mrs. Radloff, and his kindergarten classmates. He decides to write Mrs. Radloff a note. He writes:

K N I B K M T L S K P

Mrs. Radloff has been reading the early writing of young children for many years. Even though she can't tell at a glance what Dennis' note says, she assumes it says something--she assumes, that is, that the writing makes sense, that it is meant to convey the writer's message. She also knows that some children begin to write even before they read, and that in this kind of early writing the child relies heavily on the sounds in the letter-names of the alphabet to represent sounds in the words he wants to write. She knows, too, that when children "invent" writing in this way, they often go through a phase in which their compositions consist mainly of consonents, with very few vowel sounds represented by separate letters.

To make sense of Dennis' note, Mrs. Radloff knows that she has to rely not only on her understanding of the common characteristics in young children's invented spelling, but also on her knowledge of Dennis himself. She remembers that he has been talking about his new telescope all day, and this helps [illegible] recognize the word "telescope" at the end of his note (TLSKP). Thus she supplies context from her knowledge of the writer when she reads the text the child has written.

Dennis waits impatiently as Mrs. Radloff puzzles out his note. She makes an educated guess--"Can I bring my telescope?"--and checks her interpretation with him. He confirms her reading and she writes YES beneath his writing on the paper. This is the reply Dennis has been hoping for, and after he confirms that he has read her note accurately, he excitedly begins to tell her about some of the sights he has seen through his telescope.

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Christmas is only two weeks away and Jennifer, a student in Mrs. Hayworth's first grade class, is excited. During the regular drawing and writing period that Mrs. Hayworth has set for every morning, Jennifer draws an elaborate Christmas scene, with a Christmas tree surrounded by packages, a fireplace with stockings pinned to the mantle, and snow piled high outdoors. Under the picture (she uses a large sheet with an open space for drawings and a lined space for writing below) Jennifer writes:

> It. is. o.most. crismis
> hapey cresmes.

Mrs. Hayworth, too, is an experienced reader of young children's compositions. She knows that Jennifer is making progress both as a writer and a reader, and she sees evidence of the progress in Jennifer's composition. Jennifer's writing shows that she understands the basic principle of English spelling; combinations of letters represent sounds, rather than each letter representing a single sound. Jennifer also demonstrates that she is building a collection of frequently used words that she can spell automatically (it, is) and that she is learning strategies for spelling words that she hasn't memorized (o.most, hapey, crismis). Mrs. Hayworth observes that Jennifer has invented her own spelling of Christmas, even though the proper spelling has been much in evidence for the past few weeks. Mrs. Hayworth's experience tells her that this isn't unusual; young writers often invent their own spellings even of words readily available for copying. Soon Jennifer will develop the intellectual flexibility she needs to pause when she encounters a word she knows she has seen but can't remember how to spell, and to remember to edit her spelling once she has completed a draft. In the meantime, Mrs. Hayworth is pleased that Jennifer has enough confidence in her resources to keep writing so that she completes her message and that she finds satisfaction in being able to write.

Mrs. Hayworth observes that Jennifer uses period marks to indicate breaks between words and even between syllables within a word (o.most). This overgeneralization of the use of puncutation marks is common in the writing of beginners, and is usually short-lived. Mrs. Hayworth also notes that Jennifer has spelled Christmas two different ways (crismis, cresmes). She knows that some children have particular difficulty learning how to represent vowel sounds in English, and she is not surprised that Jennifer has varied the vowels rather than the consonants. It could be that the two different spellings indicate that Jennifer has not yet learned that a word is always spelled the same way in our current system of written English, but Mrs. Hayworth doubts that this is the correct explanation. Rather, she figures, Jennifer works on her writing one bit at a time, rarely looking back to see what she has written. When Jennifer comes upon a word she needs to "sound out," she starts all over from scratch, rather than casting back to see how she spelled it last time. Mrs. Hayworth knows that in time, and with sensitive coaching, Jennifer will surely develop the ability to moniter her writing as she goes along, looking back and casting forward as she composes.

At the moment, however, Mrs. Hayworth recognizes that for Jennifer, the written text and drawing combine to produce a composition rich in meaning for the young writer-artist, and she invites Jennifer to tape her composition up on the wall along with the drawings and writings of her classmates. Later, the children will read and admire each other's work, and the group will set eagerly to work on new projects the next morning.

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Christmas has come and gone, and Mrs. Hayworth's first grade students are back in school. Cindy works on a drawing of two girls, one with arms outstretched and the other holding what appears to be a small animal. She draws carefully, stopping occasionally to erase a pencil line and to redraw it to make it more precise. Similarly, when she completes her drawing and turns to the job of writing, Cindy pauses several times to check with Mrs. Hayworth about the spelling of a word. She writes, erases, and rewrites, making sure that every word is spelled correctly. Here is her composition:

> My sister said Cindy can I borrow
> your little white kitten and I said
> No. No. No. No. No. No. No.

Mrs. Hayworth is not surprised that Cindy wants every word spelled correctly, and she is pleased to help. She knows that Cindy is something of a perfectionist in all that she does, and Mrs. Hayworth knows that a child's approach to writing is often influenced by the child's approach to things in general. Mrs. Hayworth also knows, however, that a time will come--perhaps in first grade, perhaps not until second or third grade--when Cindy becomes less concerned with correctness in what she writes and becomes more interested in the details of the content of her writing. This is likely to occur when a child becomes fluent enough in writing to write quickly, producing relatively long and complex compositions.

Mrs. Hayworth also recognizes that the scene Cindy has created in her drawing and her writing is very likely taken from "true life"--a bit of domestic drama that may seem mundane to adults who read about it but which is often charged with significance for the young writer who does the composing. In this sense, the activity of writing sometimes serves as a kind of play for children, providing them with opportunities to try out voices and to explore--sometimes to rearrange--events real or imagined. Mrs. Hayworth expects that when Cindy's classmates view her picture and read her story, they will have their own stories of squabbles with siblings that they will want to tell.

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What, then, do these three young school children and the preschoolers we considered show us about the beginnings of learning to write? First, we can see that many children start pretending to write and even attempting to write actual messages well before they begin school, and hence before they receive formal instruction. Thus we can see that the beginnings of writing instruction in school do not, in many cases, mark the beginning of the child's development as a writer; rather, teachers work with learning that is already in progress. As James Britton, a British scholar well known for his studies of children's language development, reminds us, the teacher who understands how children develop as writers "seeks to reap continually a harvest he has not sown." Young children teach themselves some of the important early lessons about the nature of writing.

We can also see that most young children want to write--they want to use writing to make their mark, to assume the roles of adults and older children, and to enhance their ability to have their say. The homes of many young children are well equipped to support the child's experiments with writing. Such materials as paper, pencils, crayons, markers are often abundantly available, and children make much use of them. In this period children also encounter writing of several kinds, from the children's books parents read aloud to them to the cereal boxes they look at while they eat breakfast, and these offer models of how written language works.

This is not to say that children arrive on the first day of first grade as experienced writers--they don't. Even though they have seen a lot of writing and have experimented with writing themselves, they are still beginners, and they need opportunities to continue their writing experiments. With sensitive and sympathetic coaching, they will be able to make remarkable progress during the elementary school years in learning the uses of writing, acquiring and refining their knowledge of the forms of written language, and increasing their control over the composing process.

Learning the Uses of Writing

Jerome Bruner, in his essay, "Learning How to Do Things with Words," comments that in infants' development of gesture and speech, "new forms of communication emerge initially to fulfill old functions, and then bring in new functions with them." This observation about the language learning of very young children offers us a powerful way to think about how older children--those in the elementary grades in school--learn the uses of writing. From this perspective we would expect that when children begin to experiment with the new medium of writing, they use writing to serve and extend the functions already served by the more familiar symbol systems of speech, drawing, and dramatic play. Then, as children become more experienced both as writers and readers, they discover functions unique to writing. Taking this perspective, we can develop approaches to helping children build their own bridges from "not writing" to writing.

Children's uses for writing are partly determined by the circumstances in which they write. In school, children write what they are expected to write, or at least they try to. Teachers who recognize that children need to build bridges from familiar activity to the newer activity of writing often invite children to use writing as an extension of certain kinds of talk. Very common in the early grades is writing that serves a "sharing" or "show and tell" function. After requesting that her teacher write out the word "snail" for her to copy when she needed the word, one first grader wrote about an episode involving her friend and her friend's sister:

> Alana's and Ila's snail had six baby's.

Another first grader wrote:

> I have a dog. I love her.
> Her name is Daphne.

One of her classmates, hearing this composition read aloud, wrote one of her own:

> I want a dog. but my mom wont let me.

Once the young writer increases his control over the act of writing and becomes more fluent in his compositions, he can extend public statements of this sort to include more detail and explanation. The relatively longer text below is an example; the experience this first grader reports, reminds us that even the beginning writer sometimes writes at home, incorporating writing activity into his play:

> At my house I hav a ofis upstars
> in my adick and its are printing
> ofis that we print newspapers at
> and we prent sports and we prent
> news and we even tipe some
> the end

One way that some teachers help children develop fluency as writers is to encourage the use of writing to extend the function of speech by conducting written conversations with each child in a class--the child writes an entry in a journal, the teacher writes back, the child responds, and so forth, often two or three times a week. The teacher enters the exchange as one party in a two-way conversation, commenting on what the child has written and rarely or never on how well he has written it. Many teachers who use writing in this way with their students report that over time, most children's entries become longer and more complex. And increases in length and complexity are partly the result of the child's continuing development of fluency and partly of the child's increasing sense of his correspondent's interest in what he has to say. Researchers Jana Staton and Roger Shuy are currently analyzing dialogue journals written by sixth grade students and their teacher, examining (among other factors) the degree to which this kind of exchange deepens the personal working relationship a teacher is able to establish with each of the many students in a typical sixth grade class. Teachers I have observed modulate their responses in these ongoing written conversations to invite individual children to experiment with a range of uses for writing--explaining, arguing, narrating, and generalizing. These teachers recognize, however, that the child learns more about writing if he makes his own decisions about what he says and how he says it, and so the child reserves the right to respond as he chooses, and even to initiate discussion of a new topic. The guiding requirement is simply that the conversation be maintained.

Children also use writing to tell stories, either chronicling the events of their own lives or inventing fantasy tales. For many children, this represents an extension of a function already served by speech. Arthur Applebee's developmental studies of children's "concept of story" suggest that some children begin telling stories when they are as young as two or three years old. Applebee notes the case of young children weaving tales of a rudimentary sort as they lie in bed before going to sleep at night (child language researcher Ruth Weir labelled these as "presleep monologues"). Applebee points out that storytelling is different from many other uses of language; the teller often derives as much value from the act as a listener does, and sometimes children tell stories when they are alone, out of earshot. Telling stories allows children to play with language, and to play with experience--to recall events, to fantasize, to reflect, to wish.

In some elementary school classrooms, children have the opportunity to compose stories aloud, with the teacher or a volunteer parent serving as a scribe, writing down the child's dictation. This has long been seen as a useful strategy in helping children begin to read--the child can see his own language in print, and can learn a great deal about the correspondence between spoken and written representation. Dictating to an adult scribe can also help the child develop as a writer; free of the difficult task of writing out his own message, and having a "live" audience restored to the composing situation, most children produce longer and more complex narratives than they can at this early stage when they write on their own. Often these stories seem undistinguished to adult readers. They recount the daily events of the child's life, or wind aimlessly through small adventures in the unplotted life of a fictional character. However uninteresting to an adult reader, these compositions have value for the young "composer"--they represent the child's attempts to organize and reflect on either the realities or the possibilities of experience, and at the same time they provide occasions for the child to try out linguistic and rhetorical techniques for putting together texts.

Other times, however, the young child's dictated stories are very compelling, revealing the intensity of the narrator's feelings and concerns. One first grader, for example, whose mother was soon to have a baby, dictated this story to her teacher:

> Anna was a little girl. She was littler than her dog. She was littler than her sister. She thought she was littler than her goldfish, but it really wasn't true. She had a baby brother and she hasn't seen him yet and she thought he would be bigger than her. One day Anna went out, feeling small. Her friend came to play. They played dolls.

> Anna had a doll that was up to her hip. Her friend had one who was up to her knee. It was a very small doll. After they had a tea party, her friend went home. Anna went home and had dinner and got into bed with her doll and said her prayers. And in her prayers she wished to be bigger. "I think my wish will never come true," said Anna to her doll.

The first stories that young beginners write by themselves are usually short, and very often incorporate the stylized conventions for beginning and ending a tale--"once upon a time," and "the end." In most cases, these conventions have not been taught to children. Rather, the young writer has gathered from the stories he has heard and read that stories have marked beginnings and endings, and he forms his working theory of how to use the conventions he has noticed. Indeed, children experiment with conventions of this sort just as they experiment with spelling and punctuation conventions. One first grader tried out the conventional opening for a fairy tale in her report of an incident at home:

> Once upon a time my baby sister flushed a rag down the toilet.

Some stories written by young children give the impression that the writer has used the activity of writing to experiment with the elements of a narrative, arranging facts and events in the same way that young children arrange their toys, to see what configurations can be made. A seven year old girl, for example, wrote:

> Once upon a time a little girl named Sally had a brother named Sammy. Sammy had trucks he liked. Sally had dolls she liked. Sam's favorite car was Toyota. Sally's favorite doll was Mary. They had dinner then Sam played trucks and Sally played dolls.

Other stories that children write seem to represent not only an extension of the functions of speech, but also the functions of dramatic play, in which children act out scenes and try on different roles. In a sense, a story writer is like a puppeteer, putting words into the mouths of the characters he brings forth and creating situations for his characters to play out. Some narratives written by young children seem occasions to manage bits of remembered or imagined conversation. Though thin on plot, the following narrative, written by a first grader, does show the writer managing dialogue effectively:

> One day I said to my mother, Mom. What dear she said. I want to go out. Then go out she said. And I played with my friends.

Once they become more experienced and can manage more in each undertaking, young writers tend to instill more drama into writing of this kind, as in the narrative below, written by a seven year old girl:

> The Big Fight
>
> Once upon a time there was two little girls. They aways fighted. One morning they had a new swing set in thire yard. But the had one parbom. One of the swings were broken and they both wanted to swing. And thats where the fight started. I want it! Its mine! It's mine! I saw it first!
>
> The end.

Children also use writing to tell fantasy stories, sometimes maintaining distance from the fantasy by sustaining the narration in third person and other times placing themselves in the thick of the fantasy, telling the tale from the point of view of a first person narrator. This second grader, writing at Hallowe'en time, shifts from third to first person mid-story, and with his resolution at the end of the narrative indicates the value to children of having opportunities to use writing in this way:

> Once upon a time ther was a boy. He saw a old house and he went in it. It was cary and then he saw a ghost and ran away fast. The next day he went back and when he got back he went upstairs. Then he ran into a room. Then the thing came in it had big fangs the boy ran. It was after me and the door was locked and I was afraid. Then I got home I said I got to write about this mom.
>
> The End.

Some theorists suggest that young children should be encouraged to write narratives as the most "natural" starting point in learning the uses of writing. Recent studies by researchers such as Susan Sowers and Blenda Bissex, on the other hand, demonstrate that some children, given choices, write statements and explanations in their first compositions. Whatever we learn from continuing research, however, it is important to recognize the value of telling stories in children's writing development. As we have seen, children like to write stories, and seem to invest much in at least some of the stories they write--perhaps novelist Reynolds Price has not overstated the case in claiming that "a need to tell and hear stories is essential to the specie Homo sapiens--second in necessity apparently after nourishment and before love and shelter." We should also note that in learning to write stories, children develop control over many of the linguistic and rhetorical techniques they will need in using writing for other purposes.

Along with using writing to extend the functions of speech, drawing, and play, children also experiment with writing used for purposes they recognize both from their reading experience and from observing adults and older children when they write. Many children are eager to create books of various kinds, even before they have much of the wherewithal a writer needs to write even a page, not to say a book. And they manage quite well--they gather up several sheets of paper, a stapler if they can get hold of one, and pencils, markers, crayons, or whatever drawing and writing instruments are available. Then they draw pictures and "write" the text; sometimes the pictures sustain the continuity of the book, and other times, particularly in the case of young writers who have developed some control over the physical act of writing and some fluency, the captions or bits of story line are more dominant. In constructing their homemade books, children model their own productions not only on storybooks, but also on word books, children's encyclopedias, or other informative books they may own or have borrowed from the library. (One first grader reports, "I made a book about waoles.")

Children also write notes and letters, and thus join in the ongoing domestic correspondence that characterizes the regular business of many families. Children write notes expressing anger or pleasure, or just to say where they are going and when they will return; they write notes to brothers and sisters, letters to friends and relatives who live near or far, greeting cards honoring holidays, and even reminders to themselves. In developing their skill in using writing for these purposes, children often imitate forms of writing they have seen. Yet learning uses for writing is not simply a process of imitating forms--rather, the child adapts available forms (and invents new forms where he needs them) to fulfill his intentions, to accomplish his purposes. Researcher Glenda Bissex reports that when he was five through nine years old,

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her son persistently used writing in these forms: "signs, labels, captions, stories, little books, directions, lists or catalogues, newspapers, notes, letters, and greeting cards." Bissex comments, "Across the forms of Paul's writings runs a characteristic inventiveness--an experimenting, a playfulness, a delight in construction: elaborating, combining, altering existing forms rather than just imitating them."

In some homes, children seem to write often and for a ra[illegible] of purposes, while in other homes children seem neither to read nor write much at all. Teachers who recognize the value of creating a variety of situations in which children write for their own purposes can no doubt reduce the inequity of home writing opportunity by providing ample writing experience for children in the classroom. Current research by Susan Florio and Christopher Clark at Michigan State University should soon give us a view of how such teachers in both grades two and six incorporate a range of uses for writing into the "culture of the classroom."

Certain uses of writing seem to belong exclusively to the classroom. These represent occasions when children write about what they are learning. Here, for example, is an essay written by a third grader about the looms she saw on a visit with her class to the local historical museum:

> Looms
>
> Most pioneers had looms. Looms were made out of wood. Some pioneers made there looms

> and (others) bought there looms from a crafts man. Big looms often made blankets or clothing. Little looms were often made for belts and suspender. Both men and wemen weaved. A loom is made for making fabrick and then (fabric is used to make) clothing and tabble cloth and other things.

Another member of the same group was intrigued by the old diaries she saw at the museum, and she incorporated this use of writing into her two-part essay:

> Long ago people used covered wagons to move west. If you were moving west you could only take things you really needed to survive. Things like: a plow, a gun, a bullet mold etc. Here is a page of a diary of a girl moving west.
> "Today we reached Oregon. Father claimed a piece of land. Then he built us a shelter. Then father went to get some wood. I helped mother make dinner and set the table. I must go to bed now."

The first of these two young writers uses her essay to report what she had observed and been told. No doubt she will have many occasions in school when she is expected to use writing in this way, and she shows that she is learning some of the techniques for managing that function of writing. The second writer also reports her observations, but in addition she adopts the voice of another character, thus using the activity of writing to explore the point of view of a historical character interesting to her as well. Many teachers encourage children to use writing to not merely account for what they have learned, but as an activity that allows the young writer to explore various dimensions of the subject matter. British educator James Britton, in his book Language and Learning, has made a persuasive case for the importance of helping children to use writing as a learning process. Indeed, educators who recommend "writing across the curriculum"--writing activity in all the subjects taught in school, and not just in language arts--point out that writing can be an effective activity in helping children learn the material of social studies, science, and even mathematics. We have seen that an important dimension of learning to write is learning the uses of writing. We have seen that children need to build bridges from the familiar activities of speaking, drawing, and various kinds of playing, to the new activity of writing; thus, much of the early writing of elementary school children can be viewed as serving and extending the functions already served for children by these other symbol systems. At the same time, children are usually eager to try out the roles of the writer as they have inferred these roles from their reading or observed them in the behavior of adults and older children. In these uses of writing, children try out forms, partly imitating forms they have seen and partly inventing versions of their own. Children's uses for writing in school are largely determined by the situations which their teachers set for them to write in. When children write often, for their own purposes, and in a variety of situations, they become experienced not only in the act of writing but in using writing for a range of purposes. As they become experienced both as writers and readers and as they develop intellectually, children become more sophisticated in distinguishing among possible uses for writing and increasily alert to the choices and conventions within particular uses.

Learning the Forms of Writing

Following the example of researcher Donald Graves, I recently asked some elementary school children what they thought a good writer needed to know in order to write well. Some responses were concerned with the process of writing--one seven year old said that a good writer must know "how to think hard," and another noted that a good writer recognizes that "nobody is perfect. You can always do it again." Many children, however, commented on written language forms, and the writer's need to manage several kinds of form, from "drawing" the proper shapes of individual letters and constructing spellings to handling the linguistic devices that make long stories or complicated explanations coherent.

The first grade children usually mentioned the forms and tools that seemed to them most basic--a good writer must know "the alphabet," said one first grade child, "how to hold a pencil and the ABCs," said another, "how to spell words," said another, and "the right letters" said yet another. Even some of these beginning writers, however, indicated their recognition that there are several levels of form in written language. One six year old noted that a good writer should know "how to spell and how to make a good story," implying that just as there are rules for spelling correctly, so are there conventions for making a good story.

The various levels of form in writing that children must learn to bring under control are more apparent in the older children's comments. A fourth grade student, for example, said that a good writer must know "how to spell words like 'paraphernalia' and he has to know when to stop a paragraph and when to put in a period." One of his fourth grade classmates seemed particularly aware of the many considerations of form that a writer must contend with, commenting that a good writer must know "how to spell, capitalize, not get his thoughts mixed up, punctuation, and the kind of story he or she is writing."

Fortunately, as experienced writers we don't have to cope with this flurry of formal problems all at once when we write--most decisions about spelling and punctuation have become automatic for us, and we know that we can work on problems of continuity and coherence once we have composed a draft that says roughly what we want it to say. Indeed, so automatic is managing many of the formal characteristics of writing for most adults, it is difficult for us to appreciate the learning that young children accomplish in their early years as writers. Theorists often remark that children tend to be "egocentric" writers, meaning that the child sees his subject only from his own perspective and does not recognize that his reader may not share his knowledge or his point of view. Less often are we reminded that parents and teachers tend to be "egocentric" too, in the sense that we do not recognize that young children approach writing with understanding of the nature of written language that may be different from our own. Just as an important part of a child's development as a writer is "decentering"--learning to see the world from perspectives other than just one's own--so, too, an important step for teachers and parents who want to help children learn to write is to recognize the young child's accomplishments even in the early stages of learning written language forms.

For some children, writing seems to begin as a part of the activity of drawing. Some preschool children, for example, draw signs and banners that include alphabetic letters that correspond to the shapes the child wishes to put into his picture rather than speech sounds the letters usually represent. Often well before they begin to read, however, most children learn to distinguish between drawings and written language, and thus they begin the long process of determining exactly how the system of written language is organized.

As the young child learns how to print the letters of the alphabet, he is also learning a number of other lessons about the graphic "layout" of written English. He learns that written language proceeds from left to right, that most words are represented by sequences of letters, that spaces are left between words, that pages of writing are organized top to bottom, and much more. There is a lot to learn, and no child learns it all at once. During the period from about four or five years of age to about six or seven years, children become more conscious of the systematic nature of language both written and spoken, and begin to understand the idea that language patterns are stable and hence predictable. Researchers have called this new understanding "metalinguistic awareness"--awareness of language as language. This new awareness enables the child to become more adept at manipulating language for his own purposes.

Before we consider how children learn to manipulate language in this way, however, we should note that for most children, writing and drawing remain intermingled long after children are able to make a conceptual distinction between the two activities. Many children continue to embellish their written compositions with drawings, from earnestly composed illustrations to casual sketches and marginal "doodles." Making elaborate cartoon strips is a favorite activity of some elementary school children, as it allows them to continue to combine visual and linguistic symbols in their productions. Children also occasionally add embellishments to the actual shapes of the letters they produce; sometimes they add decorative shadings and twists, and other times they exploit the visual nature of writing to achieve communicative purposes, such as emphasizing a word by making it larger and bolder than the rest of the words on the page. When we read young children's writing, we must keep in mind that writing is, after all, visible language, and for many children the connections between writing and drawing are as strong as the connections between writing and speech.

Nonetheless, children do, of course, learn that spoken language can be represented in writing, and an important part of learning the forms of writing is learning exactly how speech is represented in written language. This is an active kind of learning for children, much like their learning of the basic structures of spoken language--they develop hunches or hypotheses about the underlying principles that govern the language they encounter, and they adjust and refine these "rules" as they become more experienced and sophisticated readers and writers. Researchers studying children's speech development have long recognized that errors in young children's speech can reveal what the child knows about language, as well as indicating what the child still has to learn. For example, the child who says "foots" for "feet" understands a basic principle for creating plural noun forms in English; he doesn't yet know that the case of "foot" and "feet" works differently. In this sense children "invent" their language, often creating forms that they have never seen or heard by applying rules they have inferred from the language they have encountered.

A number of researchers have recently undertaken studies of young children's "invented spellings," trying to discover how children apply their language learning strategies to learning written language patterns.

The children studied in much of the recent research produced their invented writing spontaneously at home, as a part of their play activity. In school, many children are reluctant to experiment freely with writing--they sense that there is a correct way to write, and they depend on their teachers to tell them what it is. Some teachers of young children, however, believe that children make faster progress when they develop confidence in their own strategies for generating language, even if the child has not yet developed all of the strategies that mature writers use. In one kindergarten class, for example, children were observing the status of the bean seeds they had planted. Four year old Jill drew a picture of a bean seed and then asked her teacher to spell out the words "bean seed" for her to copy. Jill's teacher encouraged Jill to try her hand at writing the words herself. In a few minutes Jill returned to show her teacher--quite proudly--that she had done it: BE CD. On her own, she had also decided to label the stem: STM.

As children understand more about the language they are learning to read, their spelling strategies incorporate some of the visual principles of the English spelling system--they learn, for example, that a "silent e" at the end of a word affects the sound represented by the preceding vowel (as in

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"ride") and that in some words a letter is "doubled," as in "seen." Children also begin to spell by analogy, using a construction from a familiar word to represent the same sound pattern in a new word. We can see evidence of these strategies in the following narrative, written by a six year old boy. (I have repeated each line in conventional spelling under the original.)

WUNS ther WUS A bOte
(Once there was a boat)

tiher WUS A bOte With No WUN ON it
(There was a boat with no one on it)

So I toK A riDe the bOte toK me in A
(so I took a ride. The boat took me in a)

Strage PLASe it HAD AL this KANDee
(strange place. It had all this candy.)

I Got OWt of the bOte I WOtiD to eAT
(I got out of the boat. I wanted to eat)

LAts OF KANDee BUt the KANDee WoD NOt
(lots of candy but the candy would not)

KUm ooF the WHLs BUt GUSD theN I WUS
(come off the wheels. But just then I was)

trAPD IN the KAVe I FOWND A SeeKrit PASIG
(trapped in the cave. I found a secret passage.)

I WAT IN the PASIG ther WUS SUM roBrs
(I went in the passage. There was some robbers.)

the rOBrs Wor KOWNting the MUNe thAt thAe StoLe
(The robbers were counting the money that they stole.)

Reading this six year old's narrative, we can see that when a child develops new spelling strategies, they do not automatically lead him to the conventional spellings of the words he writes. Indeed, it is common in language learning generally to observe the learner overgeneralizing newly acquired strategies. Here, the young writer shows insight into how speech is written in such words as "bote," "kandee," and "fownd," even though he has spelled these particular words incorrectly. Most teachers of elementary school children help their students correct their misspellings, and when the help is based on an understanding both of spelling patterns in English and of children's language learning strategies, it can be very effective. Spelling help combined with help in techniques for copy-editing can be especially effective. It is important to recognize, however, that errors in young children's writing can be seen to reveal advances in the child's knowledge of how written language works. Reporting on her research on "The Relationship Between Oral and Written Language: The Children's Viewpoints," at a recent meeting of the International Reading Association, Emilia Ferreiro concluded:

> Children have shown us that they need to reconstruct the written system in order to make it their own. Let us allow them the time and the opportunities for such a tremendous task.

Just as children learn the patterns of English spelling gradually rather than all at once, so do they learn gradually the conventions for punctuating their writing and the options available to them as writers for structuring their sentences. Children's major resource for learning the forms of writing is their reading experience; direct instruction usually builds upon the intuitions about punctuation and grammar which children develop from observing such forms in the material they read. While no doubt some exercise work on particulars of grammar and punctuation helps children become more confident in managing these elements of written language in their own writing, researchers have not found evidence that extensive drill makes a significant contribution to the young writer's development. Studies currently being conducted by Donald Graves, Martha King, Elsa Bartlett, and others are likely to shed considerable light on the early stages in children's development of control over the forms of writing. For now, it is plausible to suggest that frequent writing experience with well-timed editorial coaching from teachers is the context most likely to promote the child's learning of both the uses and forms of written language.

When I speak to parents about how their children learn to write, I am often asked whether parents should correct the errors they notice in their children's writing. It is a simple question, but it requires a complicated answer. The aim of correcting errors in a child's writing is not simply to adjust the quality of the writing, but to help the young writer learn more about how to manage the forms he may want to use when he writes. Certainly children, like adults, are able to learn from having their mistakes pointed out to them. But children--again like adults, let us admit--are often sensitive about having their own productions criticized and changed, and they sometimes feel disappointed and even angry when their parents seem compelled to convert opportunities for sharing into occasions for instruction. Children want their parents to read what they write and to respond as readers, with interest and pleasure, and not merely as critics. When parents clearly communicate an interest in their children's writing, many children will ask for advice about spelling and punctuation, and teaching occasions arise quite naturally. The best answer, then, to the question many of us have as parents--should we correct our children's writing?--is that we ought to respond first as interested and admiring readers and we should let our children determine what kind of help we provide, and when.

Teachers, of course, must approach the question of correcting children's writing differently, as it is teachers' responsibility to help children learn to control the forms of writing. Nonetheless, experienced teachers know that the key problem is not whether to correct children's errors but rather how to teach children to edit their written work; sensitive teachers also know that for most children, learning to edit is a slow process, and that even in the early stages of learning to edit, children need supportive and appreciative readers for their work.

At the same time that children are learning the forms of spelling, punctuation, and grammar--partly from absorbing and reconstructing the written language they encounter when they read, and partly from the coaching and instruction they receive from their teachers--children are also learning the larger forms of written discourse, from story plots to conventions for arguing and explaining. Here again there are bridges from speech to writing; children begin to experiment with narrative form as storytellers before they become story writers. Similarly, many children try out the patterns of explaining and persuading in the context of conversation or class discussion before they attempt expository or argumentative prose. Researchers studying children's spoken language development and others studying the intellectual processes involved when children comprehend what they read have only very recently begun to show us how children learn to tell and understand stories. While we don't yet know very much about how children manage such learning, we can find some reassurance in knowing that in spite of our ignorance, children have been learning narrative form for centuries, indeed for as long as people have been using language for purposes ranging from gossiping to creating myths to explain life's deepest mysteries.

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Learning the Writing Process

Speaking is a social act. Speaking connects the speaker with the people listening to him. Writing is different; to compose his message, a writer must withdraw from his immediate social environment. Many people have found that this solitary character of the writing process has its drawbacks. H. L. Mencken, for example, noted that a writer is "continuously and inescapably in the presence of himself," and added, mock-wistfully, that if writers "could work in large, well-ventillated factories, like cigarmakers or garment workers, with plenty of their mates about and a flow of lively professional gossip to entertain them, their labor would be immensely lighter." The difficulty of writing is not merely that a writer must, as Mencken puts it, perform "its tedious and vexatious operations *a cappella*," but that the writer, though he works alone, nonetheless must make his language communicative. This aspect of the writer's situation has led some theorists to argue that writing is a very complex cognitive process. The Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky has written that in "conversation, every sentence is prompted by a motive" whereas "the motives for writing are more abstract, more intellectualized, further removed from immediate needs." When we write, Vygotsky adds, "we are obliged to create the [communicative] situation, to represent it to ourselves." The advice normally found in composition textbooks for coping with the considerable intellectual demands of the writing process is that a writer should divide his work into stages, first making a plan, then writing a rough draft, and then revising his draft. But in recent years a number of researchers have observed people as they write, and the results of such studies have led these researchers, as Sondra Perl notes in her recent essay, "Understanding Composing," to question

> the traditional notion that writing is a linear process with a strict plan-write-revise sequence. In its stead we have advocated the idea that writing is a recursive process, that throughout the process of writing, writers return to substrands of the overall process, or subroutines (short successions of steps that yield results on which the writer draws in taking the next set of steps); writers use these to keep the process moving forward.

How do children learn to manage all this? How do they learn to manage the sustained intellectual work that writing demands? How do they learn to anticipate a reader's reactions and questions and to pitch their writing to meet those reactions questions? By what series of steps do children become able to engage in what Donald Murray has called the recurring cycle of rehearsing, drafting, and revising--how do they learn to "keep the process moving forward"?

The common view among educators has been that younger children simply cannot learn much of this. Instruction and coaching in the composing process, if it is offered at all in American schools, is provided in high school. Research on students' composing processes has concentrated on older adolescents and adults. In most elementary schools, children are taught the "mechanics" of writing and are given drillwork in sentence structure and grammatical terminology; when they write, they engage in what is usually called "creative writing"--fantasy stories, accounts of personal experiences, impressionistic poems--and are not often asked to do more than produce a first draft.

The assumption that younger children cannot learn to manage the composing process is mistaken, according to Donald Graves, a researcher who has conducted extensive studies of children's composing practices. Graves believes that educators have seriously underestimated the potential writing ability of elementary school children.

Graves, along with colleagues Lucy Calkins and Susan Sowers, spent two years in the classrooms of an elementary school in New Hampshire, observing children in first through fourth grades. Graves is quick to admit that he is something of a maverick among educational researchers. For one thing, he prefers to conduct case studies in which he engages in close "naturalistic" observation of individual children over extended periods of time--he does not see much value in short-term experiments that compare the effects of different teaching methods. Furthermore Graves is also willing to advise the teachers of the children he is studying on how to develop classroom teaching practices that encourage writing and that emphasize the elaboration of the composing process. "If children are given the chance to write, they will," Graves has said, and in his studies he has concentrated on children who get plenty of chances. While his research strategy and methods may limit the degree to which the results of his studies can be generalized, his observations nevertheless do provide significant and assumption-challenging evidence of what younger children--children as young as six years old--*could* do and could learn to do if classroom teaching of the sort Graves has encountered (and perhaps has promot[illegible] in New Hampshire were more common in American elementary schools.

Graves' studies confirm the generally held idea that when a young child is just starting to write, he concentrates on the construction of the spellings of the words he is writing. At first, the child's mind is not on developing several drafts, or even on writing fully developed sentences--he must concentrate instead on developing plausible spellings for each word. In relatively short time, however, the child's horizons broaden during the composing process; he becomes interested in making his writing neat and aesthetically pleasing, and he brings into play what he understands of the proper uses of punctuation. Once a child develops some confidence and a measure of control over spelling, punctuation, and the graphic space of the page (confidence and control, it should be understood, are not meant here to suggest complete maturity), the child can, Graves suggests, concentrate on "information"--on the content of his message. Once the child becomes focused on what he wants to say, he becomes able to elaborate his composing process to encompass some planning, drafting, and even some revising. Graves has found that many seven, eight, and nine year old children are able to work through several drafts of a single piece, developing the complexity of their compositions from one draft to the next.

Because it is not at all common for elementary school children to be encouraged by their teachers to write several drafts of a single composition, it is worth considering in some detail how this sort of elaboration of the writing process is managed by the children in the New Hampshire school where Graves and his colleagues have conducted their studies. The most thorough account of a child's composing experience yet published by Graves' research team may be found in an article entitled, "One Child, One Teacher, One Classroom: The Story of One Piece of Writing," by Barbara Kamler (published in Language Arts, September, 1980, V. 57, N. 6, pp. 680-693). (Barbara Kamler is a lecturer at Riverina College of Advanced Education, Wagga Wagga, New South Wales, Australia. She spent several months observing second grade students as a guest researcher in Graves' project.)

Kamler begins her account with this introduction of Jill, a seven year old in second grade: "Jill was in a slump. She was stuck for a good topic to write about." In Jill's class, students write regularly, and indeed they write all the time. When their writing goes particularly well, it often happens that their stories or accounts are made into informal books, which then become "high interest" reading material for the students in the class. Jill's two previous attempts at writing had not gone well, Kamler explains; the two topics Jill had given herself, "The Day I Changed My Room Around," and "Cats," had resulted in "two stories lacking in detail and interest for both reader and writer." Conferring with Jill, Jill's teacher attempted to draw Jill out a bit on one of her topics (cats), trying to help her find more material to use in her story. Jill did not in this instance "respond to her teacher's questions about content." The problem, Jill's teacher decided, was that Jill simply didn't know very much about her subject. She didn't "have a cat to watch" and so has had difficulty "describing things." Kamler quotes an exchange between Jill and her teacher in which the teacher presses this point:

> Teacher: It is really easier to write if you have a lot of information about a topic. . . . It would be very easy for me to write this book Cats because I have a cat and I could watch it all the time.
>
> Jill: (mournfully): I can't.
>
> Teacher: That's right, you can't. I can tell you'd really like to have a cat though. That's rather obvious to me.

The point thus established, Jill's teacher led the conversation to a reconsideration of possible topics for Jill's next composition. Because the teacher requires her students keep a running list of "Some New Ideas to Write About" on the inside left covers of their writing folders, Jill was able to produce a ready set of possibilities:

1) Washington, D.C.
2) Florida
3) Hershey Park
4) My Bird

In this part of the converence Jill "showed the most interest in talking about her bird, Gus," Kamler reports. Jill's teacher "followed [Jill's] lead, exploring the possibilities of the topic and stressing the potential contribution to Jill's readers: 'How many people in this room do you think would know what a cockatiel is?'"

Several points are worth noting here. In the first place, Kamler's account makes clear that the context in which Jill writes is a classroom where students produce writing steadily, all the time--it is one of the main jobs they do as second graders. Seven year old children become, in this class, experienced writers. While this experience does not make them mature writers--no seven year old is a mature writer--it does make the job of writing familiar to them. A second point to note is that children in this class are firmly guided by their teacher--the teacher confers regularly with each student and she sets procedures (such as keeping a list of new writing ideas on the inside cover of a writing folder) that her students follow even when they work alone. In this respect, the writing process is for these second gra[illegible] a collaborative undertaking, with the teacher guiding and coaching each child. I shall want to return to this point further on; here it is enough to observe that as these second graders elaborate their composing practices, they receive firm guidance from their teacher in how to do so--and they receive a clear message from her that she expects them to follow the composing practices she prescribes.

A third point worth noting about Jill's selection of "birds" as a topic is that in the framework of the teacher's prescribed composing practices and procedures, the children are allowed, indeed encouraged, to make many decisions for themselves. Jill decides which items to put on her list of topics to write about, and she has the final say on which topic she will pursue (in this case, it must be observed, Jill's teacher seemed to infer the topic Jill most cared about, or knew most about, and then steered Jill toward selecing it). Graves has suggested that it is in making decisions about which topics to write about that children first learn the basic principle of revision. In his article, "What Children Show Us About Revision" (Language Arts, March 1979), Graves writes, "Revision begins when children choose their own topics. Children who quickly arrive at a number of topics, learn to exclude some topics and write on others, are learning to revise." In view of the rather firm direction Jill's teacher provides in the composing episode Kamler describes, it is not clear how far along in this sort of "learning to revise" Jill can be said to be. In any case, observers familiar with the common elementary school teaching practice of dispensing "creative writing assignments" (sometimes called "story starters") will recognize that this teacher's practice of asking students to select topics from their own lists of ideas offers uncommon opportunity for children to learn how such decisions, akin perhaps to decisions required in revising drafts, are made.

Once Jill and her teacher arrived at the decision that Jill would write about her bird, Jill went to work on the project, following well-established classroom procedures for drafting, conferring, revising, conferring again; and in the nineteen days from her composition of a first draft to the publication of a much-revised version as a classroom book, Jill's piece underwent remarkable development. Here is the first draft, written, as Kamler notes, in twenty minutes of "rapid bursts, with frequent stops in between":

> My Bide is a coktel He cherps all day. Chip
> A coktel is funny looking Thay look a libt like
> I made a mastake on Pacg the 2
> My sestr rather have a hows insted
> I love my bird
> My brid side to saye good By.
> The end.

Having made this start, Jill carried her work through a series of conferences and revising sessions; Kamler provides this chronology:

March 6: Begins composing.
March 7: Completes composing.
March 11: Conference with Debbie (a peer). Makes Draft II revisions.
March 11: Conference with Egan (Jill's teacher). Makes Draft III revisions.
March 13: Skills conference with Egan. Makes Draft IV revisions.

March 21: Group Conference. Makes Draft V revisions.
March 24: Illustrates book. Binds book.
March 25: Shares book with whole class. Book enters class library.

And here is the final, "published" version of Jill's piece, with some copy editing presumably done by Jill's teacher or by the "parent volunteer (who) typed the book over the weekend":

> My bird is a Cockatiel.
> He chirps all day on the door.
> My bird has vitamins in his water.
> I think it is funny, don't you?
> His food is sunflower seeds and gravel
> and parrot seeds.
> The cockatiel is funny looking because
> he has feathers sticking up and when he's young
> his face is gray and when he's older, his
> face is yellow.
> One fine night the bird flew out of the den
> and the dog bit the bird and the bird didn't
> die but the dog pulled out some of the bird's
> feathers and he threw up. The dog said
> 'Grrrrrrrrrer' at the bird.
> My sister would rather have a horse instead
> because the bird chirps while we are watching
> t.v.
> I love my bird because he is nice to me.
> My bird said to say "Goodbye."
> The End.
> About the Author
> My bird is named Gus.
> His name is really Augustus.
> On my Mom's anniversary, we got a bird.

Just the growth in bulk of Jill's piece from first sketch of fifty-seven words to the final copy of 169 words (an increase of more than 300%) suggests how substantial were Jill's changes from the original during the composing process. The major emphasis in the teacher's work with Jill was getting Jill to add details, new anecdotes, and explanations. Summarizing the teacher's analysis of Jill's first draft, Kamler writes: "The problem:

a skimpy story about a bird named Gus. The focus (of the conference they were to have): how to get the child to add information." The teacher's emphasis on getting Jill to add information is clearly evident in the final product of Jill's labor: details about the bird's food have been added, as have details about the bird's feathers sticking up and the color of the bird's face; an anecdote has been added about "one fine night" when the family dog nearly ate the bird; also added to the original have been explanations--the bird is funny looking because of his feathers and coloring, and Jill loves her bird because it is nice to her. The result of this emphasis on adding information is that the text Jill was written is not very coherent, jumping from detail to anecdote to new detail without much explanation of how one part is meant to connect to the next. It may be this quality that leads Kamler to remark, "As I looked again at Jill's published book, I was not overly impressed. The book was interesting but ordinary. It was certainly not the best published piece Jill had done that year." The piece strikes me as undistinguished, too, largely because it seems a layering on of particulars, a collection of material, with no evidence of a guiding idea in the writer's mind of what she is trying to accomplish. But to say this may be to miss the point. What Jill was actually trying to accomplish, it seems to me, was to complete a piece of writing that satisfied the expectations of her teacher and her classmates. Such pieces of writing have details in them, have anecdotes, have explanations; they do not necessarily have any points to make.

What is remarkable about this piece, Kamler notes, is not the quality of the text but rather the evidence the final version provides, when compared to Jill's initial draft, of how substantially even a seven year old child can revise a piece of writing. "The extraordinary thing was the process," Kamler writes, "a process that gave Jill room to pull herself out of a rut; a process that helped her develop an inadequate beginning into a competent end; a process that allowed her to emerge from one publishing cycle, recharged for the next." How did Jill accomplish this? How did she manage the sustained work of drafting, revising, and revising again?

In many respects, Jill did not have to cope with the solitude professional writers complain about. Her work was done in the classroom, and if she did not work in exactly the manner of the cigarmakers and garment makers Mencken envied, she did have plenty of her classmates around to keep her company as she worked. Jill's sustained work on the piece was largely collaborative--she conferred with a classmate after completing one draft, she conferred with her teacher after making revisions, and she conferred with her teacher and a small group of classmates as she considered which final changes to make before submitting her work to the typist. One effect of this sequence of collaborative conferences is that the writer's energies are periodically renewed, her faith in her project restored, her sense of its value revived.

Describing one of Jill's conferences with her teacher, Kamler notes that the teacher "began positively, as always, accepting the child and her piece of work as something valuable, something she had worked hard on, something worth listening to." Kamler observes that at the conclusion of the session, "Jill seemed charged by the conference." Jill's classmate, Debbie, evidently sought to provide the same sort of encouragement to Jill when the two of them met to discuss Jill's draft. "Debbie was attentive and encouraging," Kamler writes; "when Jill showed her the page-four revisions, Debbie giggled and made little claps for her friend."

Kamler reports that the children in Jill's class take on a good deal of their teacher's way of thinking about the writing process. Noticing that Debbie and Jill appeared "confident and seemed to know how to proceed" in a collaborative revising conference, Kamler comments, "They certainly had had excellent, consistent modeling from their teacher." Later, once Jill had completed her conference with Debbie and had checked her draft against a set of directives in a list she and her teacher had constructed of "Things Jill Can Do" (e.g., "Number pages," "Use periods," "Use ?," "Use 'er' like in brother"), Jill announced, "Re[illegible] for a conference." Kamler comments: "It was Jill speaking, but I heard the now internalized voice of her teacher, patiently asking each child at the beginning of each conference: 'Are you ready for a conference? Have you checked the back of your folder to be sure you are ready?'" Several days later, when Jill met with her teacher and two classmates for a "group publishing conference," Kamler observes that "The children were familiar with the structure. They would be asked to tell why their book was the best and why they had chosen it. They would read their books to one another, listening to the feedback they received so they could later decide what final changes to make." Kamler's observations make clear that Jill's teacher provides her students what developmental psychologists have called "scaffolding" for their activity in the writing process. That is, the teacher provides a framework of procedures that children follow in accomplishing tasks that the teacher has set for them; eventually, children "internalize" at least some of these procedures, and thus become able to direct their own efforts, depending less on the overt direction of the teacher. In this way children in this second grade class move from "other-regulated" ways of working on their writing to "self-regulated" ways of working which are closely patterned on the model their teacher has set for them. (The terms "other-regulation" and "self-regulation" are from studies of James Wertsch, whose research seeks to test and extend the developmental theories of Lev Vygotsky. See, for example, Wertsch's essay, "From Social Interaction to Higher Psychological Processes: A Clarification and Application of Vygotsky's Theory," in Human Development 22 [1979], pp. 1-22.)

Kamler concludes that the "classroom environment" that Jill's teacher has created "allowed Jill to experience her own writing process and develop as a writer." It seems more accurate, however, to say that Jill's teacher enabled Jill to produce a completed text by organizing to a considerable degree Jill's composing behavior. It remains an open question how able Jill will be to derive from this experience a set of intellectual strategies that she can use without the direction of her teacher or classmates. It is difficult to know, for example, whether Jill will incorporate into her own way of thinking the methods of gathering material that Jill's teacher demonstrates in this exchange during one of their conferences:

> Teacher: Think now, Jill, about Gus. Does he always stay in the cage?
>
> Jill: No.
>
> Teacher: No?
>
> Jill: Of course not! He got bit by the dog!
>
> Teacher: You're kidding! The dog bit him?
>
> Jill: Yeah! He ate one of the feathers and then threw up (voice becoming higher and more animated).
>
> Teacher: Oh no! So Gus gets out of the cage on purpose. Do you let him out? Or is it a mistake?
>
> Jill: No! The dog comes in the den, and now he knows not to come in when the bird's on the floor.

The teacher's aim, of course, is not simply to "push Jill to talk about her bird Gus," as Kamler describes this part of the conference; rather, the teacher aims to help Jill get into position to decide "what information to add to the book," and, at the same time, to show Jill what sort of questions she might ask herself to advance her project. Jill is quite willing to cooperate--the "interchange," Kamler notes, "was quick, punctuated by laughter, high spirits, and Jill's occasional exasperation." Jill's teacher, Kamler adds, "believes Jill enjoys the back and forth bantering, the parley." Just how much, however, of the collaborative method--particularly its intellectual rather than merely behavioral aspects--Jill is likely to internalize and make into her own way of composing is very difficult to know. Children can, as this particular case from the research project conducted by Donald Graves and his colleagues makes clear, be led through the production of several drafts of one piece of writing. If the case of Jill is representative, much of the child's work is done in collaboration with the teacher and with other children; how much of the process Jill and her classmates will be able to follow in less supportive circumstances is not clear. However, there is, as we have noted, theoretical justification in the work of Vygotsky and others for believing that Jill and her classmates are likely to internalize at least some of the strategies demonstrated to them in these conditions.

Toward the end of her account of Jill's experience of composing the piece about her bird, Kamler emphasizes that although Jill's teacher has set clear procedures for her students to follow in their writing projects, Jill nonetheless "remained in control," as her teacher had wanted her to, in several phases of the project:

> Jill chose her writing materials, her paper and pencil, her topic for writing. Jill determined the time spent composing, the number of interruptions she would allow or encourage. Guided through an extensive conference process, Jill decided what changes would be made. Jill chose the book she would publish, the cover the book would be bound in; she controlled the illustration process. She worked with a teacher who put the responsibility on the child writer.

Kamler clearly admires Jill's teacher, and well she might--the teacher has developed teaching methods that enable seven year old children to write regularly and to develop the complexity of their writing by elaborating their processes of composition. As I have noted, we cannot know how enduring the lessons of Jill's second grade composing experience will be. This is not to suggest, however, that such early composing experience is unimportant; it is/can be very important I believe, and it should be managed as sensitively and intelligently as possible.

Indeed, the richer a child's composing experience in elementary school, the fuller is his concept of writing as an extended intellectual process, a process with moments of satisfaction and excitement as well as moments of frustration and discouragement. It is important to recognize that the teacher who helps children develop control over the process of writing, and particularly the process of revising, enables children to use the activity of writing as a powerful learning activity. To put the point another way, children who are learning to manage the writing process are also becoming increasingly able to use writing as a learning process.

Individual and Cultural Differences

A wise and sensitive teacher I know once told me that she knows she has made a poor writing assignment when all of her students' pieces are the same--she, like many other good teachers, encourages individual differences in the writing her students do. She views her role as a teacher of writing in much the same way that Maxwell Perkins, the legendary editor of Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and Wolfe at Scribner's, was said to have viewed his role as an editor: Perkins served, according to his colleague, John Hall Wheelock, as

> A skilled objective outsider, a critical touchstone by recourse to which a writer is enabled to sense flaws in surface or structure, to grasp and solve the artistic and technical problems involved, and thus to realize completely his own work in his own way.

For a teacher to regard her job as writing teacher as in some ways analogous to the job of an editor, she must, of course, be able to take children seriously as writers. This is not to say that children can produce mature writing--they cannot, of course. But children can, if given opportunities, do what writers do: they can set a purpose for writing, they can gather their thoughts on the subject at hand, they can draft and revise; and they can, like writers, anxiously await the reactions of readers. When children write in this way, they must, like all writers, draw on the particulars of their own experience and learning--they must, that is, cultivate the material that makes what they have to say distinctive and thus worth making hard to say well; they must use their "individual differences" to full advantage.

This is not, of course, the usual way that educators think about "individual and cultural differences." What educators concentrate on are the differences in learning rate among children, and the differences in the resources of children's early home experience that might explain such differences in learning rate. To speak of individual and cultural differences in this way is to assume a normative view of writing skill. What _should_ a third grade student be able to do as a writer? Which writing skills should he have mastered? Such are the questions teachers and parents often ask when they ask about the proper scope of elementary school writing instruction. They know that it is possible to speak of grade-level "competencies" in reading skill, and they want to know what children of a given age and at a given grade level should be able to do as writers.

To date, researchers have supplied few reliable answers to normative questions about children's development of writing ability. We simply do not know what an "average" or "typical" third grade student knows and is able to do as a writer. Given the recent surge of interest in writing instruction, it seems likely that in the next decade research will be conducted to establish such norms, following the pattern of the reading research that has led to the formulation of grade-level and age-level competencies in reading. It seems likely, too, that if normative tests of writing skill come into wide use in our schools, a number of objections will be raised about the assumptions on which such tests rest. For one thing, such testing is based on the assumption that there is a single identifiable set of writing skills that all "typical" children of a given age can, and should, master--but what skills are these? Spelling skill? Skill in constructing particular kinds of sentences? Skill in managing pronoun reference? Skill in revising rough drafts? Skill in using concrete evidence to advance an argument? Because writing is an umbrella term used to refer to a number of different kinds of activity, from making shopping lists to composing novels, it has long been a notoriously difficult term for educators to define. One solution has been simply to specify what seem the most basic elements--mechanics of punctuation, conventions of grammar and usage, fundamental types of text structure--and to create tests, multiple-choice or fill-in-the-blank, that examine students' command over these elements. The trouble with this approach is that such tests don't directly examine the student's ability to write even one piece of his own work; and, unfortunately for such testing programs, it turns out that a good many students who can manage such tasks on "objective" examinations are not as able to manage the elements of written communication effectively when they must write for themselves, while other students who can manage quite adequately in their own writing projects sometimes do not show their ability very well when faced with "objective" test items. The test deviser could, of course, ask students to write their own essays, and many test makers have done just that. But then the problem becomes how to evaluate students' writing samples. Should errors be tallied? Should the general effectiveness of the piece in question be rated "holistically"? Should particular qualities be rated analytically, on a scale from good to poor? All these approaches have been tried, and all have their uses. But the fact remains: establishing norms in writing skill is tricky business, much trickier than many educators might suppose. Indeed, even when a test includes the assignment of an actual essay or narrative, the question remains whether a single writing exercise is a fair or reasonable example of what a student is able to do as a writer. So troubled by this question was the New York State Department of Education that when it designed a basic writing competency exam for use throughout the state, the department decided to require each student to write three different exercise essays. This seems not so much a good solution to a problem as rather a striking example of the problem itself: how can writing ability to validly and reliably assessed?

When writing assessment is effective (when it is fair to those being assessed and useful to those doing the assessing), it is usually being conducted in situations where the broad notion of "writing" can be narrowed considerably to encompass the uses and forms of writing that a student (or worker) must control in the circumstances at hand. It is quite possible, for example, (though not easy) to assess a college freshman's ability to write the sort of academic prose that is expected of him in his college studies. It is possible, too, to assess a young business executive's ability to meet the standards of clear and concise writing that her new job will require her to meet when she writes. There has been progress as well in refining methods for conducting assessments of general writing ability; most notable in this regard is the work done in developing the methods of writing assessment used in the National Assessment of Educational Progress, and the continuing research and program development conducted by the Educational Testing Service and other private firms whose business is developing and administering tests. My point in reviewing some of the issues in writing assessment, though, is to make clear that at present we do not have the methods for determining with any precision or reliability the skills of individual elementary school children, and so we are not in a position to review any systematic evidence of individual and cultural differences among children as writers. It is possible, however, to note possible differences among children's resources for writing. Although such discussion must be speculative, a number of recent studies do offer interesting ideas for us to consider.

Among recent lines of inquiry in the study of young children's development of writing ability has been the study of preschool children's "encounters with print." One aim of such research is to discover how children form their initial understandings of the nature of written language. The assumption of this kind of research is that when children learn to use written language, they build "theories," general conceptions of the nature and use of written language; a corallary is that, as Marie Clay states the notion, once a child "has a theory, no matter how primitive, he can pay attention to results that confirm or contradict this theory." Noting results of research conducted by Emilia Ferreiro, Clay observes that a very young child's theory of written language might include "simple hypotheses about writing such as: it has shapes (circles), shapes are separated (several circles), and shapes go in lines (several circles in linear arrangement)." Presumably the "data" the child uses in fashioning such hypotheses is available to any child who encounters print in his home or at a preschool or daycare center. And perhaps it follows that the child who encounters more print in his environment has a better chance of formulating and revising his understandings of written language than does the child who comes across less printed language. Indeed, Alonzo Anderson, in a preliminary report of a study he and his colleagues in San Diego are conducting of "The Role of Literacy in the Non-School and School Environments of Lower Class Children," observes that "the presence of reading and writing materials causes children to be exposed to more literacy events. When books and writing materials are available in the children's environment, they are apt to deal with them." One might expect, then, that one difference among children as they begin writing in school is in their conceptions of what writing is, and what writing can accomplish. It is worth noting Anderson's use of the term, "literacy event"--for no doubt a child learns about written language from interaction with other people in which writing figures, and not exclusively from his private encounters with printed language. It is from the uses other people make of written language that a child may learn what written language *means*; through his interactions with parents, with older siblings, and with other readers and writers, the child moves past his conceptions of writing as lines and circles to understandings of the particular uses to which written language is commonly put.

Shirley Brice Heath, in a paper presented at the Terman Conference at Stanford University in 1980 entitled "What No Bedtime Story Means: Narrative Skills at Home and School," suggests that there is considerable variety among cultural groups (and perhaps among families within a given cultural group) in the sort of "literacy events" young children are engaged in with their parents. Children in some families--"families that are mainstream in that they consciously and unconsciously provide experiences which orient their children toward school"--are often engaged by their parents in "school-oriented bookreading." In such activity, a parent guides the young child through a conversation about a book they are both looking at, asking the child questions, responding to the child's answers, and presenting the story in the book to the child in dramatic intonations. Heath notes the sophistication of the lessons that a child in one such "mainstream" family had learned by the time she was two years old, or so it would seem, judging from the report of her parents, linguists Ronald and Suzanne Scollon, in their paper, "The Literate Two Year Old." From her experience of hearing books read aloud to her and of talking with her parents about books, the Scollons' daughter had, the Scollons noted, become "literate before she learned to read." Heath offers an account of what the two year old had learned:

> 1) Books are a natural and "good" part of homes.
>
> 2) Books involve writing.
>
> 3) The reading aloud of books or retelling of what is in books requires a particular kind of prosody which is different from regular conversational prosody [here prosody refers to patterns of intonation].
>
> 4) Reading is in many ways related to play: it suspends reality, and is so framed, either through verbal or prop-type cues, that everyone knows immediately that it is not normal conversation.
>
> 5) Reading as a dyadic interaction carries with it the understanding that there is one person who is exhibitor and questioner and another who is spectator and respondent.
>
> 6) The respondent is expected to display knowledge of literacy in ritualistic ways; she should not provide a full knowledge of the text, but responses to specific questions about the text addressed to her by the exhibitor/questioner.

Having learned these lessons about the nature of written language and about the ways of using writing, the Scollons' daughter began, by the age of three years old, to "write" her own stories and then to "read" them aloud. The scribblings she produced bore little resemblance to the extended tales she told as she "read" aloud her own compositions, but the point is that she had assumed the role of writer and reader, and so was well on her way toward becoming able to make meaningful use of written language.

Heath, in developing her discussion of "what no bedtime story means," points out that the three cultural groups she studied in her ethnographic research among three communities in North Carolina tended to engage children in quite distinct kinds of "literacy events." As a result, children from each group came to their early school experiences with different conceptions of written language and different experience of appropriate "reading" conversations between children (inexperienced readers and writers) and adults (experienced readers and writers). One implication of these cultural differences in children's early orientation to written language, Heath notes, is that if all children are to be helped to succeed in school reading and writing tasks, children from differing cultural groups may need differing kinds of beginning reading and writing experience and instruction. Another implication, Heath is correct to point out, is that educators may, in light of the different "approaches" to becoming literate evident in these families, have to broaden their theories of children's reading and writing development, and broaden as well the range of teaching practice that follows from such theories. Marie Clay, in her essay, "Learning and Teaching Writing: A Developmental Perspective," indicates that her own understanding of children's written language development has broadened in recent years. She had believed, she notes, that preschool children's knowledge about reading and writing "came from books that were shared with children," but, she continues, "studies of children who wrote before they entered school have led us to a more general statement." In her formulation of this general statement, Clay notes that her experience in testing Samoan children on their "concepts about print" led her to recognize that home experience with reading and writing takes various forms:

> Children are constructing theories about print from diverse experiences--seing print in the environment, putting pencil to paper, thumbing through books and magazines, and receiving birthday cards, invitations, and letters. This broader concept of developing a knowledge of literacy accounts for the high scores obtained by Samoan school entrants in New Zealand on a Concepts About Print test. They came from Samoan-speaking homes and did not have story books in their own language. But probably their immigrant parents received letters from Samoa, and the strong church affiliation of this group with bible reading as a family activity evidently led the children to some awareness of the importance of print by quite a different route than being read to from children's books by their parents.

What, then, can we say about children's individual differences as writers in elementary school that may stem from differences, either individual or cultural, in their experiences as readers and writers at home? First, we can say with confidence that young children's home experience with written language *does* vary, both in the sheer amount of written language children encounter and in the amount and kind of interaction children have as readers and writers with their parents and other experienced users of written language. Heath suggests that this variation in home experience affects the child's succe[illegible]n early school reading and writing activity, and no doubt she is right. Yet both Heath and Clay point out that there are probably several routes, not just one, to developing a full and powerful understanding of the forms and functions of written language. Clay cites examples of the Samoan children who, though not native speakers of English and thus at a considerable disadvantage in New Zealand schools, had developed insight into the uses of written language from their experience with their own language at home. This raises the issue of bilingual education and children's development as writers. The aim of teachers in elementary schools in the United States is, and must be, to help all children become able to read and write English effectively. The question remains whether non-native speakers of English are best served by learning to read and write first in their native languages, or whether they are more likely to become proficient readers and writers of English by reading and writing English from the start of their time in school. The question is far from settled; Joshua Fishman's studies, currently in progress, on children becoming "biliterate" in several kinds of situations in New York should provide new insights into this matter. In the meantime, teachers in varying programs across the country must be guided by the best thinking they can muster as they help children learn to read and write English and at the same time help young children, whatever their native language, develop a sense of the personal value of writing--a sense that writing is, after all, a way of speaking.

It is a separate matter to determine how best to help children whose spoken language is a dialect that is commonly characterized as "non-standard." Here the issue is not whether to change the speech of young children, but rather how to help such children learn to read with ease and comprehension the language found in books and other published material. Once children become proficient readers, their reading experience becomes their chief resource as writers. Thus, it would seem to make best sense, in aiming to help them control written English, to work at enabling speakers of non-standard dialects of English to become proficient readers rather than concentrating excessively on correcting their written language. All students, of course, can and should be shown how to edit their own writing, and in this context specific features of written form can be taught to students who seem unaware of them. But it is important to note that all children, whatever their spoken dialect, must, as a part of their development of writing ability, construct from their reading experience the forms of written language. Such learning, as we have noted earlier, is gradual rather than sudden--and even as children demonstrate evidence of "learning in progress" in their written language errors, they are, if they are writing regularly and purposefully, developing and refining their understanding of the uses of written language. Whatever the differences in writing ability and disposition among children in a given group, a teacher properly aims to develop each child's writing ability as fully as possible. Good teachers know that, as James Britton has put it, "you can't correct the writing of someone who doesn't write." A teacher must, that is, help children become writers, become people who write for their own purposes, before the corrections of editor can take hold. And, of course, when children are writing regularly, they are demonstrating individual and perhaps cultural differences regularly, too--including not only differences in skill, but the differences in experience and angle of vision that give writing its life.

The Role of the Teacher

If there is a central lesson in the current work of researchers studying children's written language development, it is that learning to write involves more than simply being taught. As a child learns uses for writing, increases command over the forms of written language, and develops control of the writing process, he draws on several resources. He draws, of course, on his knowledge of spoken language and on his ability to use language in various situations. Although a child's knowledge of the forms of speech will not provide him a full accounting of the forms of written language, and although speaking is normally situated in dynamic social circumstances while writing normally is not, much of what a child knows about the structure of speech will serve him well when he writes.

Also among a child's resources as he learns to write is his experience as a reader. Here it is important to construe "reading" broadly, making the concept encompass a child's experience of hearing written language read aloud as well as his experience of seeing and making private sense of print. Another element of a child's experience that can be valuable to him as he learns to write is his observation of parents, siblings, and others as they read and write. It may be that some children learn as much, or even more, about the uses of written language from observing people making use of print than they learn from reading and inferring uses from texts themselves. No doubt children also draw on their own early experience as writers in developing and refining their understanding of the uses, forms, and processes of writing. And, as we have noted, some children begin to experiment with writing well before they receive formal instruction in the school subject called English composition.

What is the teacher's role in the child's development of writing ability? Acknowledging the range of resources available to children as they learn to write, James Britton has suggested that the teacher of writing "seeks to reap continually a harvest he has not sown." Recent research by Donald Graves, Martha King, Jerome Harste, William Teale, Elizabeth Sulzby, Yetta Goodman, Carol Chomsky, and a number of others confirms, in various ways and with qualifications of one kind or antoher, the view Britton here expresses. Thus a number of educators have been led to argue that the major role of the teacher in helping children learn to write is to provide children with plenty of writing opportunities: "Let them write," as Donald Graves puts it in the title of his report to the Ford Foundation on the current state of writing instruction in American schools. Yet it is misguided to suppose children will, if simply turned loose with pencil and paper, teach themselves to write well; in most cases, they won't. Studies conducted in the contexts of elementary school classrooms by such researchers as Susan Florio, Jennifer Greene, and Jana Staton have begun to provide details about the complex job a number of intelligent, purposeful, and sensitive teachers are doing of organizing writing experience for children in ways that allow children to draw on their own resources as writers and at the same time allows the teacher to instruct and coach children in the skills of composing. Such studies lend support to the idea that the teacher's major job in helping elementary school children learn to write is to provide children with ample writing experience, but these studies also make clar that good teachers play an active, indeed "interactive" role in the child's development of writing ability.

At this point, our consideration of the role of the teacher could move in two quite different directions. We could, on the one hand, inquire more deeply into the interaction of the processes of learning and teaching. For such theoretical ruminations, we would need to review the educational psychology of learning, and would need to bring forward for close consideration the ideas of Vygotsky and other Soviet psychologists whose work, some of it written fifty years ago, has just recently begun to receive serious attention from American psychologists and educators.

Or we might, on the other hand, turn our attention to the practical side of our question--what specific methods, we could ask, have successful elementary school teachers of writing developed for use in the classroom? Certainly there is no shortage of material for such a discussion. In recent years there has been a great profusion of material published on the teaching of writing, much of it published by, or distributed through, the National Council of Teachers of English. Although it is a book that concentrates on the teaching of writing to high school and college students, the title of a recent NCTE publication--Eight Approaches to Teaching of Composition--serves well as an emblem of the amount and diversity of teaching advice now available to elementary school teachers who wish to be responsible and intelligent teachers of writing.

Rather than pursuing theoretical questions about the interaction of teacher and student, and rather than reviewing the vast quantities of teaching advice now available, it would be most helpful and appropriate here, however, to consider a brief general analysis of how a teacher can organize a good writing program for elementary school students. The analysis that follows is admittedly a personal one--it is my own view, based on my sense of the current research and on my experience observing and working with teachers and children, of how teachers can best organize their students' writing experience and instruction. This is not to say, however, that the analysis is quirky or idiosyncratic; it is not. Rather, it is consistent with much of what I take to be the best--most intelligent, most informed--current discussion of teaching writing in the elementary school. I have tried, in formulating the analysis, to make it definite, yet also to cast the teacher's functions in a way that allows for the range of teaching styles common in good elementary school teaching, from the "open classroom" approach to more traditional ways of teaching. In so doing, I have sought to highlight the best features of teaching approaches as diverse as the "classroom as culture" arrangement described by Susan Florio and Christopher Clark, the book-making activities described by Donald Graves and his colleagues, and the varied teaching I have observed in the schools I have visited and worked in.

So: How can a teacher organize a good writing program? Here is an answer in six parts:

1. Establish a general context for writing.
2. Create good writing situations.
3. Set good working conditions for writing and provide coaching and support during the composing process.
4. Read what children write.
5. Respond to children and their writing.
6. Teach specific writing skills in the context of children's writing experience.

Let's consider each part in turn.

1. Establishing a general context for writing. Because a child's reading experience is among his most important resources as a writer, one way that teachers can create good general contexts for writing is to give students plenty of opportunities to read rich and varied material. A central place in children's reading experience should be held, of course, by the best available literature, both classic and contemporary. And, as we have noted, teachers can contribute significantly to children's reading

experience (and thus to children's resources for writing) by reading aloud to them. Along with encountering first-rate literary works of various kinds, children should also have opportunities to read (and hear read aloud) writing produced by other children. Reading and hearing the work of other children serves to connect a child to the community of readers and writers who see the world from a familiar vantage point--indeed, any writer does well to keep abreast of the work of his peers, the better to learn what is possible in his own writing.

In establishing a general context for writing, a teacher must also find ways to make clear to students that their productions of various kinds, from drawings and clay sculpture to math problems and observations logs for science experiements, are respected and taken seriously. Many teachers believe that children should enjoy their schoolwork, and that children may thus learn that learning can be fun--as indeed it can be. But an intellectual undertaking, which is to say a project that requires hard thinking, whether the thinking is done by an adult or a six year old, is difficult work and can be frustrating as well as pleasurable even for the youngest school-age child. The elementary school teachers I have been most impressed by know this, and while they hope to establish pleasant classrooms, they recognize that it is most accurate to regard learning as potentially satisfying rather than merely potentially fun. Hence, they encourage children to work ahead, even when their drawings-in-progress or their long division problems become frustrating. Children in such classes do work ahead, sometimes alone and sometimes with help, when they know that the result of their effort will be respected by the teacher and their classmates. Most teachers demonstrate the seriousness with which they regard students' work by asking students to share and discuss what they have accomplished. The implications of this general approach to students' work for the handling of writing are clear: writing is not always fun, even for first and second grade children, and surely the process is not always easy; but writing can, and should be, a satisfying (and in that sense pleasurable) activity. A teacher who finds ways to convey respect for students' written compositions establishes the value of the process of writing in the larger context of the activities of the class.

Two additional characteristics of a good general context for writing can be stated briefly. First, since writing often begins in talk, a teacher does well to promote classroom discussion that encourages children to reflect on a variety of subjects and then to speak their minds and to listen to the ideas and opinions of others. And finally: a good context for writing is one in which children write regularly and often.

2. *Creating good writing situations*. Any experienced teacher knows that no single writing assignment will unfailingly bring good results. Nor are there many writing assignments that can't

be fashioned into successful writing projects in the right circumstances. "What I did on my summer vacation" can be a bore, tedious for children to write and tedious for teachers and classmates to read; yet much of the best and most satisfying writing children produce is based on the material of personal experience, and the experiences of a summer are potentially as useful to a young writer as any other experience. Similarly, writing assignments based directly on material in some part of the curriculum--history, say, or science--can produce splendid writing and can offer valuable opportunities for children to "personalize" what they have learned; yet if a teacher does not develop such assignments intelligently, the writing that results from them can be dull, uninformed, and unengaged, the result of a process of composition that has been nearly worthless as an exercise for the student. It is useful, therefore, to shift our analysis from the question of what makes a good assignment to the broader question of what constitutes a good writing situation for children. Reviewing recent research reports and professional discussion and reflecting on my own observations of children writing, I have concluded that a writing assignment usually succeeds when four conditions have been met in the writing situation: a) children write about subjects meaningful to them; b) children have opportunities to talk before they write; c) children control their own writing projects; and d) children write with the expectation that their writing will be read. Because creating good writing situations is at the heart of the teacher's role in helping children develop writing ability, it is worth considering how teachers can create writing situations that meet each of these four conditions.

a. Children write about subjects that are meaningful to them. Bruno Bettelheim has said about learning to read that "the acquisition of skills . . . becomes devalued when what one has learned to read adds nothing of importance to one's life." This would seem equally true of learning to write, and certainly one way that children come to value the activity of writing is through the opportunity it provides them to think about subjects that matter to them and to share their ideas with others.

A great variety of subjects are potentially meaningful to children; children like to write about the events of their daily lives and about the things they have learned, both in school and out. Perhaps the best general rule for teachers to follow is to encourage children to look to their experience for writing material and to avoid isolating writing activity from other parts of their lives. In this connection it is important to keep in mind that the inner world of fantasy is also a rich source of material for children, and that some of the liveliest and most complex writing children produce combines fantasy and daily experience, with the stuff of school lessons occasionally mixed in. One second grader, for example, used his science class observations in composing a long and intriguing story about Sam the Mealworm, a circus trapeze artist who retained his ability to perform nineteen flips in the air even after he had metamorphosed into a beetle.

We often speak of "motivating" children to write, but it is important to recognize that creating writing situations in which children write about subjects meaningful to them serves a larger purpose than just tricking children into writing without complaining. Our purpose is to help the individual child discover value for himself in the activity of writing even as we help him develop writing skill.

b. *Children have opportunities to talk before they write.* The composing process does not begin when a child puts pencil to paper. Rather, the composition of a piece of writing begins back in the experience that provides material to the writer, and involves a crucial stage in which the writer reflects on his experience, analyzes it, interprets it, and begins to consider how he will present his material to a reader. Because writing begins in gathering and analyzing material, it is important for children to have a chance to talk before they turn to the job of writing drafts. Even in independent writing situations where a child chooses both what to write and when, children should be able to talk through their ideas and plans either with the teacher or with other students. When a teacher organizes a group writing session, a good beginning is usually a discussion among members of the group. When students are asked to write about a common subject, the discussion helps them explore the possibilities and options in writing about the subject at hand. When each young writer is encouraged to pursue his own subject, the group discussion centers on the variety of subjects the students are considering and investigates some of the possibilities of each.

Talking before writing can serve two functions. First, each writer is given a chance to reflect on his subject and to begin to organize his thoughts about it; and second, the individual is able to hear how several peers and fellow writers are thinking about tackling their projects, and thus he gathers support and perhaps new insight into his own undertaking. Because many elementary school children are unable to sustain the extended composing processes of mature writers, talk prior to writing can serve the further purpose for them of creating a spoken rough draft, a trying-out and reformulating of the message they want to record in writing.

Once momentum has built in a group discussion, the teacher's job is to redirect group energy into individual effort, focusing the discussion sufficiently so that students don't feel stuck with all the world to write about and no sense of direction, yet keeping plenty of possibilities open so that each writer is able to claim authority and control over his own project.

c. Children control their own writing projects. An important part of learning to write is learning how to make choices.

Through experience, maturity, and well-timed coaching, a young writer increases his skill in making decisions about what to say and how to say it so that his writing will satisfy both him and his readers. Children learn how to make writing decisions when they control their own writing projects and come to regard their writing as an extension of their own knowledge, ideas, and beliefs. Thus children should have regular opportunities to set their own subjects and purposes for their writing, and even when the subject and purpose is set for them, children should be helped to recognize that they have the power and responsibility to choose material and specific direction for their own compositions.

It is also important that children maintain their control over their writing projects throughout the composing process. In providing instruction and advice on gathering and organizing material, drafting, revising, and proofreading, a teacher must work as a collaborator who understands the young writer's intentions and seeks to help the student realize them as fully as possible, and must be certain that the student being coached so interprets the interventions. Otherwise, writing activities can seem to students simply arbitrary exercises, and the student finds little reason to think through the writing decisions posed in such undertakings.

d. Children write with the expectation that their writing will be read. Along with writing about subjects meaningful to them, having opportunities to talk before writing, and controlling their own writing projects through the composing process, children should expect that their writing will be read. One important reader, of course, is the teacher. Classmates also make up a valuable audience. Other potential readers include other members of the school community (other students, teachers, and administrators), parents, and members of the community at large. Indeed, one of the key roles for the teacher is that of publisher--it is the teacher who sees to it that students' writing has an audience.

For the young writer, expecting to have his writing read serves two purposes. First, knowing that his work will be taken seriously once he is finished deepens the value of the activity itself. And second, anticipating a reader's response focuses the young writer's attention and resources on making the wisest decisions he can in negotiating the transaction between writer and reader.

3. *Setting good working conditions for writing and providing coaching and support during the composing process.* Although we have discussed much of what constitutes "good working conditions" in our consideration of good writing situations for children, I nevertheless believe that teachers are wise to recognize that the actual circumstances in which children write are significant both in affecting the quality of children's work and in allowing a teacher to confer with individual children while others are occupied with their own projects. In the classrooms where

Donald Graves has conducted his studies, teachers tend to create very firm guidelines for the procedures students are to follow at various stages in the process of composing their books. These procedures allow students to guide themselves, in effect, through much of the job of writing. The teacher is thus free to concentrate on conferences with individual children. Other teachers organize their classrooms differently, in some cases guiding entire groups of children through the writing process and in other cases setting up something like a "study hall" arrangement in which students work alone on their writing or other projects while the teacher circulates among them, offering help and lending support. Whatever classroom arrangement a particular teacher prefers, the teacher does well to keep in mind that when children write, they need to have space and sufficient quiet to do sustained individual work; yet children should also have opportunities to confer with the teacher and perhaps with classmates about writing-in-progress. In view of these two conditions, it is small wonder that the mere logistics of establishing good writing programs for students can pose considerable problems for even veteran teachers. The essential problem to solve is how to provide individual coaching and at the same time to keep work going smoothly for, say, twenty-five young writers.

4. Read what children write. My experience has been that good writing teachers read their students' compositions first and evaluate them later. They try first to make contact with the

young writer's voice--they read for "content." They read every composition each child writes, reading to learn what each writer has to say. When such teachers read rough drafts, they convert their understanding of what the writer is trying to say into advice for the writer, on how to realize his intention more fully. On selected readings, whether of draft or final copy, effective teachers I have observed read for evidence of learning-in-progress--they read to discover which forms and which techniques a student is experimenting with, which aspects of writing the teacher might most profitably bring to the student's attention. Even the most diligent teachers read only selected pieces of their students' writing this way: no teacher can read every piece closely and analytically (unless, of course, the teacher doesn't ask students to write very often). But it is one thing to read analytically, for pedagogical purposes, and quite another to read sympathetically and intelligently, completing the transaction between writer and reader. The teachers I have observed who have seemed to me the most successful teachers of writing do the best they can to serve as sympathetic and intelligent readers of all the writing their students produce.

5. Responding to children and their writing. It is not uncommon, in discussions of the teaching of writing, to hear arguments about whether teachers should "correct" their students' writing or should instead respond "positively," commenting only on the "content." In fact, good teachers do both, and more. Teachers

may respond in as many as five ways to children and their writing--a teacher need not, of course, respond in all five ways to every piece each student writes, but rather may respond in a way or combination of ways that seems best suited to a given situation. The first way a teacher may respond is as an *interested reader*. Such a response can be written or it can be spoken--in either case, the teacher responding as an interested reader responds to *what* the student has said, to his message or his story or his explanation, and not merely to how the piece has been written. A rule of thumb for gauging whether a teacher responds as a reader is simply put: if a student has written about dogs, the teacher's response, either written or spoken, is about dogs--not about spelling or sentence structure. The value of responding as an interested reader is obvious: such a response makes clear that a student's writing has been read, and not merely evaluated. When children become accustomed to receiving readers' responses from their teachers, they are able to see that school writing projects need not be "dummy runs," but can be authentic, if sometimes modest, acts of communication.

The teacher who responds as a reader does not preclude the possibility of responding critically to a student's writing; indeed, the teacher may also respond as both a *collaborating editor* and as an *evaluator*. The distinction I wish to make here between an editor and an evaluator has to do with the point in a writing project at which the teacher communicates his judgment of the qualities of a student's piece of writing. A collaborating editor coaches and guides the writer as the writer continues to work on the composition--the editorial response is made, that is, during the composing process, when the writer can incorporate the teacher's advice into subsequent work on the piece. The evaluator's response, on the other hand, is made once the piece is finished. The teacher's evaluative response--in the form of comments, perhaps in the form of a grade--communicates the teacher's judgment of the quality of the student's completed work. Many teachers do not make this distinction, and the result is often that the teacher's editorial advice comes after a piece is finished and is put to little use. It is important for teachers to see that their editorial response is essentially a set of judgments about writing-in-progress, expressed in a way that the writer can use the judgments to improve the work at hand. The evaluator's response is an assessment of the quality of finished piece of writing and of the progress that the completed work indicates in the student's development of writing ability.

Along with responding as a reader, as an editor, and as an evaluator, a teacher can respond in two additional roles: as a publisher and as an archivist. In responding as a publisher, a teacher finds various ways (from bookbinding to reading aloud) to put a student's writing before readers. It is important for a teacher to serve as a careful reader of students' writing.

But it is also important for a teacher to allow, indeed encourage, students to move beyond the private writer-reader relationship of student and teacher and to place their writing before a broader readership, including classmates and both children and adults from the larger community of the school. Some teachers accomplish this by creating "functional" writing projects for their students, ranging from writing letters to public officials to making storybooks for younger children. Projects such as these can, when managed by teachers who know how to instruct students during the composing process, provide particularly valuable experience to children just learning to make their writing fully communicative.

A number of teachers I have observed make a point of preserving the writing their students produce, keeping files themselves or organizing classroom procedures so that students keep files of their own. In a sense, then, these teachers serve as archivists--they keep records of what their students have thought about, what has mattered to them, what they have felt. Students in these classes enjoy reading work they have written earlier in the school year; they enjoy, too, reading the writing of students from previous years. Along with deriving pleasure from this sort of reading, students can also assess their own writing in relation to the work of peers; they can gather ideas for their own future writing projects; and, looking back over their own previous work, they can trace evidence of their own development of writing skill. In addition, teachers have their own uses for such "archives." A file containing a year's worth of writing by a particular student is often useful as the basis for informed consultation between a teacher and parents who wonder how their offspring is managing as a writer; selections from files of students' writing can also be useful in discussions among teachers of varying grade levels who meet to "articulate" expectations for students' achievement from grade to grade.

6. *Teaching specific writing skills in the context of children's writing experience*. In this discussion of the role of the teacher in children's development of writing ability, we have concentrated on ways in which teachers can provide children with substantial and intelligently guided writing experience. The discussion has been based on the assumption that the process of learning to write involves more than being taught--and thus that the teacher's first job is to help students gain experience as writers. It is clear, I hope, that I believe the job of providing writing experience for children is not merely a matter of making random writing assignments and correcting papers (or marking papers with stars or smiling faces). Rather, the job entails establishing a general context for writing, creating good writing situations, creating good working conditions, reading students' writing with care and responding to student's writing intelligently. By organizing a writing program for elementary school students in this way, a teacher creates

regular opportunities to teach specific writing techniques and facts about written language in the context of children's writing experience. To help children revise what they have written, for example, a teacher must help them understand which characteristics of written language help make writing fully communicative. To help children edit their writing, a teacher must help them learn how to prepare clean written copy. In most elementary schools, lessons in grammar, usage, and mechanics of writing are included in the language arts curriculum, and these lessons are often taught in isolation from students' actual writing projects. Such instruction can be helpful to all children and can be crucial in the development of skill in some children. It is important, however, for teachers to recognize that instruction in language arts, however valuable, is not sufficient to help students develop writing ability. Students need opportunities to write.

The School as an Environment for Learning to Write

Lawrence Cremin, in his book, Public Education, defines education as "the deliberate, systematic, and sustained effort to transmit, evoke, or acquire knowledge, attitudes, values, skills, or sensibilities." Cremin notes that in this formulation he aims to "make room for study as well as instruction, thereby embracing the crucial realm of self-education." He defends his definition on the grounds that "it acknowledges that behavior, preferences, and tastes are involved, as well as knowledge and understanding." A more straightforward, if less careful, definition of a writer's education was advanced by the novelist Flaubert: all that a teacher can offer a writer, Flaubert suggested, is a kiss on the brow and a kick in the pants. In the previous chapter I sought to strike a compromise between Cremin's careful, crabwalk-like definition of education and Flaubert's sharper and narrower way of seeing how people learn to write. I suggested that the central job of the teacher of writing is to provide ample writing experience for students; in this respect, I sided with Flaubert. But in outlining the teacher's role in organizing and supporting students' writing activity, I have, like Cremin, tried to distinguish the parts of the educator's job and to recognize the components of the general ability of writing that teachers do well to cultivate in their students. Now, in viewing the school more generally as an environment in which students learn to write, I want to make some suggestions about the resources for "self-education" in writing that a school may provide its students.

First, however, it is necessary to consider briefly those characteristics of school writing activity that may communicate to at least some students a set of "knowledge, attitudes, values, skills, or sensibilities" concerning the nature of writing that can have the effect merely of a kick in the pa[illegible] and can, I believe, discourage students who are not quick to develop a knack for writing from ever developing much skill as writers. One such characteristic of school writing activity is speed with which students are expected to compose their writing. They are asked to think quickly, and then to write quickly, too. Such is the character of the "essay exam," the kind of writing assignment in which students are asked to address a question and write an answer in ten or twenty or thirty minutes. Essay examinations are common in high schools and colleges, and less common in elementary schools, of course. But even some of the assignments that teachers conceive as "free writing" or "creative writing" are presented in a way that follows quite closely the structure of the essay examination: students are given a question or a task, are asked to think about it for a few moments, and then must begin writing. They are expected to turn in their papers at the end of the session. I suspect that this way of organizing writing activity has its origins in many teachers' experiences of writing in school, and that those experiences have their institutional origins in the conversion of recitation from a spoken to a written act--what I have come to regard as the "bureacratization of recitation." In a recitation, of course, a student is expected to have mastered and memorized the material of the lesson for the day, and value is placed on the student's ability to recite his or her lesson clearly, directly, and without hesitation. There is no place for brooding before, and no place for revising after; the alert student simply says what he has learned. These expectations and these values have been transferred, for a number of reasons, from the classroom act of standing up and reciting to the classroom act of sitting down and writing.

Whatever the merit of these historical speculations, it is quite evident that in many schools today, the successful writers among children are the rapid writers, the facile, perhaps even glib, writers. Unless other kinds of writing activity are organized for students--allowing, for example, some deliberation before writing, or some time to pause and reconsider during the process of drafting--many students not only fail to write well, but have no way of becoming more adept as writers except by pressing themselves to rush their work. Eventually, writing will seem only a kick in the pants to such students, and they will avoid the activity whenever possible. They will also develop a sense that some people are natural writers while others aren't, and will assume that they belong to the second group. Nor are the rapid writers served well by a writing environment that resembles a newspaper office as the daily deadline approaches, for they become skillful at quick, often necessarily superficial, formulations of their thinking and may have difficulty when they encounter writing situations in which more thoughtful and careful work is expected.

If rapid-fire writing assignments become something of an unintended punishment for students who work best when they work deliberately, there are, in some schools, other writing assignments that are meted out quite intentionally as punishments for students who misbehave. Writing can be a punishing process, to be sure, as most professional writers are quick to testify. But to reduce the act of writing to penance for running in the hall or talking out in class seems an unnecessary and perhaps self-defeating exploitation of the difficult and tedious aspects of the writing process. It also seems an odd distortion of the relationship between student-writer and teacher-reader. Better, I should think, to find a different means of punishing students for infractions of various sorts, leaving the process of writing to the educational function rather than the policing function of the school.

Having noted some of the negative characteristics of some schools as environments for learning to write, let me now turn to two specific projects which seem to me to have greatly enriched the writing environments of the schools in which they have been undertaken. I shall describe each project very briefly, and then comment on the contributions these projects and others like them can make to creating a setting in which young writers may flourish. These particular examples of interesting projects come from my own observations in schools I have visited; I know of no formal research on writing projects that span different classrooms as these do, but I am certain that an interested reader may find many other accounts of such undertakings in *English Journal*, *Language Arts*, and other pedagogical journals in which teachers describe successful experiments in their teaching.

In one of the schools I wish briefly to discuss here, a primary (grades K-3) school in a suburb of Chicago, the faculty has initiated a program in which grade level magazines containing students' writing are published three times a year. Separate issues are published for each grade--first, second, and third. Each issue includes twenty to thirty pieces written by children in a particular grade, with the subjects ranging from science to history, and forms ranging from poems and stories to factual reports. The students' work is originally produced in classroom activities, often in the normal course of the academic work set by a teacher. Following an established schedule, each teacher gathers a number of pieces from students' recent work and submits the collection to the school librarian, who serves as editor and publisher of the magazines. (The copy is typed by the school's office staff and reproduced on the mimeograph machine.) Once the librarian has received collections from each of the teachers of a particular grade, she selects and organizes the material for each issue, sometimes doing light copy editing herself and occasionally requesting more substantial revision from a student whose piece strikes her as promising but not yet adequately developed. The librarian confers often with the teachers whose students' work she is reviewing, and is careful to try for full representation, over the course of a year's three issues, of work by all the students in a given grade. Indeed, it is worth noting that having a piece published in, say the Third Grade Magazine, is not a matter of winning a contest; each student may expect to have at least one work published during the year. Nevertheless, the school librarian does serve as an editor, and in this role she seeks work of quality from students even as she aims for full representation among authors.

At the start of this project, teachers reported that the magazines were having little effect on their activities in the classroom, except that an approaching deadline for manuscripts put extra pressure on the teacher. At this point, the enterprise might easily have fallen victim to one of the two chief syndromes that infect many of the attempts at innovation in elementary schools. No doubt a number of the teachers felt that yes, the project seemed to have merit, but it required time and effort all out of proportion to its value, and ought therefore to be abandoned. Other teachers may well have felt after the first cycle of publication that, well, they had tried it and it had not worked--students were not writing much differently, and certainly not any better or more enthusiastically, as a result of seeing the first issue of their magazine. These reactions are natural enough, and more often than not they are accurate critiques of plans cooked up by educational reformers. But the publishing project this faculty had undertaken needed time to prove its value, and therefore the leadership of the school's principal became important. One form that a principal's educational leadership can take, of course, is to nurture new ideas and to help all involved to think through plans for new projects; another form can be to counsel patience in evaluating the success of a new undertaking. Such was the leadership that the principal in this primary school provided, and eventually after two or three cycles of publication, teachers began to find that their students were indeed being influenced both as writers and as readers by the publishing project. In time, the children themselves, not just their teachers, began to be conscious of approaching deadlines, and many children developed the habit of rereading the essays, stories, and poems published in past issues to get ideas for work to submit for the issue coming up. Noticing this, several teachers began to use the issues of magazines from other grades to broaden their students' understanding of the kinds of subjects and forms of writing available to them. Interest in seeing the work of students in other grades grew, and soon there was demand for more copies of each grade's magazines. Some teachers reported, too, adapting ideas taken from students' published work to develop writing assignments in their classrooms. Others used the magazines to emphasize the concept of audience, of writing so that other students, a real audience, could understand and appreciate the writer's message. Thus, by reading and contributing to these mimeographed magazines--which, it should be noted, have a relatively small place in the general run of activities in the school--a group of first, second, and third grade students have formed for themselves a small but authentic community of readers and writers, a community that extends beyond the boundaries of the individual classroom. Their school as environment for learning to write is richer as a consequence.

The other project I want to describe involves older students--seventh and eighth graders--but can be adapted to suit younger children. This project, undertaken in a junior high school also in the Chicago area, builds on the Foxfire tradition of assembling local folklore made famous by Elliot Wigginton. The junior high school students in this project write and publish essays and narratives based on their interviews with their parents, grandparents, and other adults in the school and in the larger community. The students gather material on their parents' and grandparents' childhood years, school experiences, and a variety of other subjects that the interviewers set for themselves.

The context of their work is an eight week writing course that is one of their school's four mini-courses in the arts: mini-courses are offered in drama, music, art, and writing. The writing mini-course is taught by a regular member of the school's English department, who teaches a year's cycle of writing mini-courses as one course in her teaching assignment. At the start of each eight week course, the teacher guides her new group of students--students rotate among the four courses through the year--in developing a general plan for the work they want to do, using publications of previous work done by students in the mini-course to help the new group develop ideas. Once a general plan is set, each student creates a specific assignment for himself, taking the advice and counsel of classmates and teacher. Students then set about gathering and organizing their material, conducting interviews and sometimes conducting library research. Material in hand, they turn to the job of drafting their pieces, again receiving advice and support from teacher and classmates; and, as the dealine for producing final copy approaches, students form editorial groups, putting the group's compositions into final form. Eventually the work is typed and duplicated, either as an issue of The Writer's Review, an informally produced school magazine, or as a volume of Voices, a more substantial and more elaborately produced booklet.

The overall writing environment in this junior high is enriched in several ways by the work of the students in this mini-course. When students are in the early stages of their projects, interviewing parents, teachers, administrators, secretaries, and custodians, the activity of writing is given a presence and a status that writing rarely has in schools where writing projects begin and end within the society of a single classroom. Also, because the writing mini-course is one of the school's arts courses, an emphasis on writing as a craft is registered in the minds of students and teachers alike, creating an image of writing quite distinct from the common image of writing as a distasteful English classroom exercise. And of course the publications themselves--The Writers' Review and Voices--are a source of considerable pride for the students whose work appears in them. The publications are also the objects of a good deal of attention from other students, who are interested in what their peers have written; from teachers, who find the students' work genuinely interesting and sometimes find ideas for writing assignments for their own teaching in the publications; and from parents, administrators, school staff members, and others who are curious to see what has become of the interviews they heard about or participated in.

The two publication projects I have described are particularly noteworthy, I believe, not because they are extraordinary--indeed, many schools have undertaken such projects--but rather because they are well within the reach of the energies and resources of most elementary school faculties. The point of such projects is not merely to publish students' writing, laudable though that goal is. The larger aim is to replace the stereotypic school-bound image of writing activity as mere exercise with a more powerful and substantial picture of writing as a process of gathering, organizing, and composing interesting material, and then presenting the finished composition to readers who will appreciate and respond to what they have read. When this more powerful image of the writing process and of the transaction between writer and reader is the pervasive image of writing in a particular school, the school becomes truly a good environment for learning to write.

How Parents Can Help[*]

It is entirely appropriate that the responsibility for helping children learn to write should fall to teachers rather than parents. Indeed it is--or ought to be--an essential goal of any school faculty to help every child develop skill and confidence as a writer. But this is not to say that parents have no role in their children's writing development. Parents can contribute in several ways.

Probably the most significant contribution parents can make to their children's early writing development is to read aloud to them--parents can read aloud stories, poems, letters, any material at all that enriches a child's understanding of what written language is and what writers do. Reviewing research on how parents' reading aloud affects young children's literacy development ("Parents Reading to Their Children: What We Know and Need to Know"), William Teale notes such studies suggest that "being read to at home is positively correlated with" children's "level of language development," their "vocabulary development," their "eagerness to read," and their "success in beginning reading in school." Teale notes that although research to date indicates "only that there is a link between

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[*] A revised and expanded version of this chapter has appeared as "How Children Learn to Write--And How Parents Can Help," by Robert and Susan Gundlach, Parents League Review, XVI, 1982, pp. 120-124.

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being read to and success in certain general competencies in language and literacy" (and does not, because much of it has been "correlational in design," provide information about "specific consequences of reading to children"), such research does seem to support E. B. Huey's hopeful sentiment, put forth in 1908, concerning the key to helping children learn to read: "The secret of it all lies in the parents' reading aloud to and with the child."

Parents should recognize that they do well to continue to read to their children even after children have begun to read on their own. Reading aloud to children--even to children who are able to read by themselves--gives them access to more complex reading material than they are able to read alone. Also, the parent who reads aloud to a child brings the qualities of a human voice to written language, helping the child to deepen his understanding of the relationship between the characteristics of print and the familiar meanings of speech. In this way, a parent may contribute to the child's learning of what is perhaps the most significant lesson a child can learn as a beginning writer: that despite the many differences of form and function between spoken and written language, the act of writing is, after all, a way of speaking.

In addition to reading aloud to their children, parents can also promote writing activities for their children at home. Most young children enjoy sending notes and pictures to out-of-town relatives and friends. Many children also like to write stories and "essays" at home, for the same reasons that they enjoy composing at school: to revive pleasant memories, to concoct fantasies, to imitate and manipulate forms of writing they have read, and to demonstrate what they have learned. For some children, writing sometimes grows out of play activity; many children, for example, sooner or later serve brief stints as self-appointed editors of homemade newspapers. These activities have the value of allowing children to continue their experiments with the forms and functions of writing.

As many parents know, children enjoy seeing their writing (both work from school and the homemade sort) on display. By displaying children's writing along with their drawings and other creations, parents convey their interest in their children's written productions. For elementary school children, having a piece of writing pinned to a bulletin board or stuck with small magnets to a refrigerator door has the effect of having a work published: it makes their writing available for important people--parents, brothers and sisters, visitors--to read and admire.

As we have noted in our discussion of the process of writing, the job of writing becomes increasingly complex and often more difficult as children get older and take on more ambitious writing projects. Indeed, as we noted in that discussion, professional writers are usually quick to testify to the difficulty of their craft. (Red Smith, the sports columnist for the New York Times, once said, "There's nothing to writing. All you do is sit down at a typewriter and open a vein.") How can parents help at this stage, when children are older and are faced with writing projects assigned as homework? One theory holds that parents should stay out of the process completely. As a parent myself, I find that this theory has much to recommend it. But parents, even good parents, are meddlers; children, even self-directed children, sometimes ask for help. What to do?

To get some reliable answers, I asked a teacher of seventh grade English, who in turn asked her seventh grade students to write out their advice for parents on how best to help students their age with writing projects assigned at school. Some of their advice is cast in negative terms: "Don't go hyper, especially if the child has had on-time papers in the past." "Don't yell at the child if he doesn't understand something." "[illegible] give examples of something an older brother or sister did that was good." "Don't push kids to write ideas they don't understand or are above their own level--don't write the paper for the student." All this seems very good advice indeed, and it makes it tempting to return to a theory of benign neglect. But other comments, some written by students whose comments are listed above, suggest that there may be a few ways that parents can help.

A couple of students advised that parents could profitably engage in a bit of carefully controlled nagging: "If it is a big project," one seventh grader wrote, "remind the child that he has to do it so that he doesn't do it at the last minute." Another student cuationed, "Don't remind them too often, just enough so that they know they have to do it." A few students suggested that parents can be helpful as readers of rough drafts, offering encouragement and perhaps even light editorial counsel. One student, for example, wrote, "Parents could help their children in a writing project by being a good listener for when the child reads out his report and then by adding some encouraging comments but also pointing out the awkward fragments. This always seems to help me."

In sum, these seventh graders suggest that older children appreciate their parents' interest and often welcome their parents' help in organizing the job the student writer faces--"help the child get good resources on the subject, help the child edit the paper, help the child get interested in the subject," wrote one student. But these students also made clear that, in the end, children wish to control their own work. "Don't excessively help them," wrote one student, "make them feel like they did it themselves." Their message seems to be that parents can demonstrate an interest, help a child get himself organized to write, be available if a child wants to talk about how to improve what he has written--but that parents should place the responsibility for getting the work done squarely with the child himself. As one seventh grade student put it, "Don't interrupt when the person is working."

Let us conclude by noting that while it is true that parents can play significant roles in their children's writing development, it is nonetheless important for educators to resist the temptation, as Courtney Cazden has identified it, "to consider motivation for literacy as something children either come to school with or don't--that it is a characteristic of children determined by their out of school life." It is the job of schools, not families, to help children learn how to write. I recall my own mother, fed up with one of her children's teachers who had telephoned to ask my mother to supervise some sort of extra school work at home on the weekend, muttering to herself as she hung up the phone, "I don't ask them to cook my dinner. . ." The remark, with its assumption that a mother's job is to cook dinner, may now seem somewhat anachronistic; but looking beyond that to the implication that it is the teacher's job to teach, it is fair to say, I think, that she had a point.

Conclusion

In exploring the question of how children learn to write, I have suggested--and current theory and research suggest--that all children can learn to write. I have suggested, too, that children are able, given support and guidance from teachers and parents, to adapt the powerful learning strategies they employ in learning to speak to the task of learning to write. I have sought to demonstrate that children can find immediate value in their early experiments with writing--research does not sustain the belief that children need several years of drill in the mechanics of writing before they are able to use written language for their own purposes. Indeed, there is reason to believe that the child's discovery of value in the activity of writing motivates him to continue to write and may well be his strongest motivation for learning to write well.

I have also suggested that while the process of learning to write involves more than being taught, teachers nonetheless have a crucial role to play in the child's development as a writer: it is the teacher who establishes a good context for writing in the classroom, who creates regular writing opportunities for children, who offers advice and coaching during the composing process, and who responds, as an interested reader or collaborating editor, to the writing children produce. Principals and other administrators have a role to play, too, in establishing the school as a good environment for learning to write and in encouraging teachers to continue their own development both as writers and teachers of writing.

These summary comments make clear that teachers and administrators who are committed to providing strong writing programs for children must devote a good deal of time and energy to the job--and must, therefore, shift time and energy and sometimes financial resources away from other jobs that might otherwise get fuller treatment during the school day. Is this commitment, and the allocation of resources that must come with it, justified? Why should children learn to write?

This question has received surprisingly little attention in recent years. Perhaps because the public concern over what newspaper editorial writers have labelled a "national writing crisis" has carried with it the implicit assumptions that writing is important and learning to write is good for children, researchers have felt little need to examine the justifications for teaching writing. (A notable exception has been the work of Sylvia Scribner, Michael Cole, and their colleagues--see their book, The Psychology of Literacy [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981].) It has been sufficient, so it seems, for researchers to cast requests for research funding, and for educators to cast requests for allocations for new instructional programs, as responses to widespread public concern about declining writing skills. In the last several years, everyone has wanted students to become better writers, and no one has seen much value in moving past the standard generalities about the value of literacy in a democracy to take a hard look at why students need to learn to write.

I firmly believe that children--all children--should be given ample opportunity in school to become capable and confident writers. I believe that learning to write can increase the individual student's power in school and perhaps later, on th[illegible]b and in his community; I believe that the writing process, properly guided or at least properly respected by teachers, can provide a student occasions for observing, reading, and thinking and for formulating what he has observed, read and thought--a student can, that is, write to learn even as he learns to write; and I believe that writing can offer a form of expression for the storytelling, or literary, motive in all children, and that giving expression to the impulse to impose literary shape on experience is an important aspect of any child's education.

But these are my own beliefs, and while I am prepared to defend them, I cannot offer them as a consensus held by educators concerned with how children learn to write. Indeed, no consensus view has been articulated, at least so far as I know. I see little value in a national effort to become more articulate on these matters, but I do believe that it is important for educators and researchers, working in their particular communities, to articulate and defend the justifications for allocating the resources of school budgets and teachers' time and energy to organizing and maintaining strong writing programs for children.

Formulating and examining these justifications can be important for two reasons. First, if the value of recent work among teachers and recent research aimed at helping children learn to write is to endure beyond the current, and no doubt transitory, intense public interest in writing instruction, the rationale for continuing this work must be well understood by educators and researchers and must be defensible before the larger community of parents, school board members, legislators, and agencies that support research. Second, formulating the case for writing instruction and for research in support of improved writing instruction requires statements of value and priority. To specify the rationale for helping all children learn to write is to say what, exactly, in the ability to write and in the experience of the process of writing is important in the lives of children. It is to take a stand, too, on what makes developing writing ability as important as, or perhaps more important than, developing other abilities. Taking a stand on these issues, a school board or a school faculty establishes the kind of writing program it wants for its students, and a professional association of researchers or a funding agency staff establishes the kind of inquiry that it deems most significant and most useful.

I hope that in the decade ahead energy and enthusiasm will remain high for strengthening writing programs for elementary school children. I hope that research will move forward in illuminating the details of how children in various circumstances learn to write and how writing finds a place in their lives. I hope, too, that new attention will be directed to the question of why it is important for children to learn to write. I hope, that is, that educators will give some hard thought to the proper place of writing instruction in American education and to the place of writing in the lives of American children. Hard thought on these issues, supported by inquiry into them by researchers, is likely, I think, to lead not only to more intelligent and effective methods of teaching writing, but also to fuller recognition of the particular ways in which children who develop control over the process of writing, for whom writing becomes a manageable activity in a range of situations, can thereby increase their power in relation to schools and other institutions, can strengthen their voices as members of their communities, and can increase their capacity for self-education.

A Note on Sources and Further Reading

My reader will note that when I have drawn on published reports of completed research, I have indicated bibliographic information in the text of my discussion; this seemed a more efficient method than appending an extended list of footnotes. I have also referred, of course, to a number of research projects currently in progress. Brief interim reports on many of these are available in Ann Humes (ed.), *Moving Between Practice and Research in Writing: Proceedings of the NIE-FIPSE Grantee Workshop* (Los Alamitos, CA: SWRL Educational Research and Development, 1981). Interim reports on other current studies of children's writing, notably the research conducted by Donald Graves and his colleagues, appear periodically in the "Research Update" column in *Language Arts*, a journal published by the National Council of Teachers of English. NCTE also publishes the journal, *Research in the Teaching of English*, and readers who wish to read more extensively in research on children's written language may consult the reports published there. Also of interest may be C. Frederiksen, M. Farr Whiteman, and J. Dominic (eds.), *Writing: The Nature, Development, and Teaching of Written Communication* (2 volumes) (Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1981) and M. Nystrand (ed.), *What Writers Know: The Language, Process, and Structure of Written Discourse* (New York: Academic Press, 1982). Finally, no reader interested in children as writers should miss Glenda Bissex's fascinating and readable case study, GNYS AT WRK (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980).